

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN EPISCOPAL OFFICE
IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST)

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ABSTRACT

This project addresses the establishment of the office of Regional Minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) as the appearance and development of an office of general oversight, an episcopate, among a people for whom this has been thought to be considered an alien concept. There is an exploration of the possible benefits accruing to the church when that office is well instituted and an appraisal of its importance in the Disciples' pursuit of their vision of a united church. There is a presentation of the hindrances which have accompanied the institution of the office and the influences which have shaped its development. It is compared and contrasted with the appearances of episcopacy in other parts of the church and particularly the so-called "historic episcopate."

The project undertakes to study the office of bishop as it has appeared in the church from the time of the writing of the New Testament to the present. There is a presentation of the work of many parts of the church including the Disciples' own studies, the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the Plan of Union of Consultation on Church Union, and the work of many scholars of ministry as these relate to the place of episcopacy in the church. There are included the results of questionnaires circulated among the Regional Ministers, local pastors, and laity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) with the intent of securing their reactions to the phenomenon of episcopacy in their church and their appraisal of the advantages or disadvantages which it might have. And there is a review of the descriptions of the office of Regional Minister which appear in

the various constitutions and other official documents of the regions of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

The results of this study indicate that the general oversight of the church by episcopal officers is not nearly as alien nor distressing to Disciples as might have been expected. There is understandably still a large degree of discomfort with a concept which sounds strange to many. But for many others this is a welcome development in the life of the church. There is a long strand of thinking which appears from the earliest days of the Disciples movement endorsing the necessity of pastoral oversight which extends beyond local congregations to cover larger districts for the faithful service of Christ on earth.

The conclusion of the project is that it will be well to continue to establish the office of bishop in the church avoiding the tendency to divert it from its pastoral mode which division has often effected the ministry of bishops negatively. It will be helpful in the continuing development of the role of Regional Ministers if they officially be designated bishop thus using a term known through most of the church for an office which is also known through most of the church. And there is a discussion of the possibility and value of introducing the historic episcopate into the ministry of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and the impact such an act might have for enhancing faithfulness to the gospel and the unity of the church.

INTRODUCTION

This project was begun and proceeded under this thesis:

The recognition and institution of the historic episcopate in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) would facilitate the ministry and mission of that communion - its members, congregations, and jurisdictions - and such recognition and institution are essential to the goal of uniting the whole church.

To many this would seem an odd thesis for a minister of the Disciples to address and for students and planners of that church's mission to consider. And yet my conversations with my fellow church members and their responses to my inquiries have shown that I am not alone in my interest in the possibilities of recognizing the reality and desirability of episcopacy in our midst. As the Christian Church proceeds in its calling to faithfulness to the leading of Christ, I believe this will become an ever livelier issue.

I have undertaken in this project to deal with the issue of governance, spiritual oversight, and the ordering of ministry in the church and to relate this central theme of the theology of the church to the manner in which the church defines itself and operates in the world. This involves such important areas as the proclamation of the Word of God, the nurturing of the people of God, faithfulness to God in the life of the church, and the continuing witness of Christ through the church. This study of one aspect of ministry as it is currently developing, particularly in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), is presented against the background of the history of the development of the episcopal office both in the whole church and among the Disciples of Christ. The historical survey explains the place of the episcopate in the life of the church and gives insights into the nature of the

office for the present and for the value of the office in the future as regards effective ministry and the wholeness of the church.

Needless to say I was gratified to read an article by Charles H. Bayer, "Are They Still Only 'State Secretaries'?". In that article Mr. Bayer made observations such as the following:

It is not entirely clear why we have shied away from the word bishop We should be ashamed if our reason is that Catholics and others who have "departed from the true way" use the title.

On the other hand, why call our regional ministers "bishops" if that is not what they are?

Our state secretaries brokered a program. They did not give pastoral oversight to congregations.

Having done the structural work, we have yet to infuse our creation with the wisdom of history. If we have a regional church which is more than a program broker, then there may be an appropriate role for the bishop.¹

Mr. Bayer has concluded that for the time-being Regional Ministers are more program brokers and less bishops. This study reaches a somewhat different conclusion, i.e., that there is in place in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) an episcopate, an office rendering general pastoral oversight of the church. This study is offered in the hope that recognizing that office and allowing it to develop in such a way that it will become more and more an office of pastoral and theological leadership will serve the people of the church better than settling for "state secretaries."

With Mr. Bayer's closing statement, "A rose is a rose is a rose. But a bishop can be a bishop only if he 'bishes.'" we heartily concur.

¹Charles H. Bayer, "Are They Still Only 'State Secretaries'?" Disciple, VII (August 3, 1980) 9 f.

And we add: Let them "bish."

The concept of the historic episcopate became less and less pressing an issue in the development of this project as the office and function of the bishop presented itself as a valuable gift to the performance of the church's ministry. The historic episcopate remains central in looking toward the healing of the brokenness of the church but it may follow the clarification of the issue of episcopal oversight in the church.

Chapter I

THE ORDERING OF THE CHURCH AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

Jesus Christ presented his church with a priceless act, his passion and resurrection, which reconciles humanity to God and saves us from sin. He committed to his followers a priceless collection of teachings which instruct us in our living. He continues to present himself to us in the sacraments which he ordained. And he calls us into his church where he continues to dwell and rule. But, to our knowledge, he did not set forth principles whereby that church should be administered nor the method by which it should pursue its goals of proclamation and service. St. John the evangelist records the great prayer in which Jesus is presented as asking that his people might be one¹ and yet largely because of the dearth of guidance in scripture regarding the way the church should function and be ordered, there are today monstrous cleavages in the body of Christ. Perhaps a little wistfully William Robinson commented, "We are in need of a continued Acts of the Apostles from A.D. 64-100, to throw light on what is obscure. It does not seem that we have any firm ground under our feet on this question of the permanent ministry until we come to the Ignatian Epistles."²

In approaching the scriptural records for insight into the way in which the church shall be organized, many have made the error of perceiving there a complete and adequate design ready-made as a

¹John 17:11.

²William Robinson, Essays on Christian Unity (London: James Clarke, 1923?), p. 127.

constitution for the governance of the church through the ages. That was not a goal of the New Testament nor is it possible to discover such a model therein.

Thomas Campbell, a leader in the "restoration movement" which arose on the American frontier in the early nineteenth century and from which developed the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), was a prime example of one who sought for patterns of ecclesiastical organization in the Bible. In Proposition 4 of the Declaration and Address, a seminal document in the development of the Disciples he wrote:

The New Testament is as perfect a constitution for the worship, discipline, and government of the New Testament Church, and as perfect a rule of the particular duties of its members, as the Old Testament was for the worship, discipline, and government of the Old Testament Church, and the particular duties of its members.³

A Disciples evaluation a century and a half after the publication of the Declaration and Address described the weakness of Thomas Campbell's thinking:

While [Thomas Campbell's] intentions were catholic, in the interest of freedom and unity, his ideology proved in the long run to be sectarian because of a defective view of the Bible . . . the New Testament is not a constitution, nor does it contain one in the sense of specific prescriptions for the order, worship, faith, and life of the church.⁴

And yet the New Testament is not silent with regard to church governance. It does present beginning points for undertaking the massive yet essential work of healing the divisions in the church which have resulted from differing understandings of church authority and order. These divisions have seriously hampered the ability of the church

³William Barnett Blakemore, (Ed.) The Renewal of the Church, The Panel of Scholars Reports (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1963), I, 316.

⁴Ibid.

to proclaim the message of Christ and serve God's world.

The first principle which must be admitted from a study of the New Testament is the fact that Jesus Christ is the head of the church. He is the high priest. He is Lord. Whatever else may be said of authority in the church, it is conceded by Christians that it resides with Christ and on earth it is derived from him.

Another important principle is the fact that the church is a visible, definable entity. The New Testament does not know an invisible church. The church is the people who have responded to Christ's call by acknowledging him to be Messiah, receiving baptism, and celebrating the eucharistic meal.⁵

Within this visible church there have always been certain functions assigned to different members of the body. Jesus himself appointed the twelve who would through the days of his earthly ministry be his close confidants and after his ascension be the leaders in carrying his message throughout the world.

The scripture gives evidence in the account of the appointment of Matthias that some vacancies would be filled when the holders of those offices were no longer able to function.

In the claim of St. Paul to be an apostle, a claim which is recognized throughout the church, we have evidence of the fact that the church's ministry was not ossified in the form which it had at the time of Jesus' earthly ministry; but there was an openness to new forms and

⁵Ronald E. Osborn, "Theological Issues in the Restructure of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)" Mid-Stream, XIX (July, 1980), p. 287.

new ways in which to carry out the work of the church. Paul did not hesitate to use his apostolic office to encourage unity within and among congregations. In John Knox' appraisal, "He seeks to exercise his authority in ways that will not jeopardize or impair the freedom of his congregations; but he does not fail to exercise it."⁶

Moving into the later years of the development of the New Testament canon, there is increasing reference to the structures which were developing for ecclesiastical organization. There is the very direct reporting in the sixth chapter of Acts of the appointment of the seven to relieve the twelve of the "daily distribution" to widows in order that they might devote themselves, "to prayer and to the ministry of the word."⁷ The pattern reported here is that the selection of the seven was made by, "the body of the disciples," and their appointment was made or ratified by the twelve.

The office which becomes the most definitive for the church during the time of the preparation of the New Testament documents is that referred to as presbyteros. This has regularly been translated "elder" although the English word "priest" is derived from the Greek presbyteros, and is commonly used in the catholic denominations to translate the term. Because of the many connotations which the words elder and priest bear in contemporary thinking, this office will usually be referred to as presbyter in this study [which is becoming the case in much current ecclesiological dialogue].

⁶John Knox, The Early Church and the Coming Great Church (New York: Abingdon Press, 1955), p. 92.

⁷Acts 6:4.

Throughout the gospels and in the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, the term presbyteros is reserved for the elders of the Jewish people. Undoubtedly the term was adopted by the early Christian communities because of their Jewish heritage and familiarity with the nomenclature of their ethnic religion.⁸ Consequently, we see a more regular use of the term in the latter part of Acts and in the epistles as a designation of an office in the various churches of the eastern Mediterranean area.

It is well to note here that the presbyters in the various churches do not appear to have been elected by their constituencies nor accepted by their own claim. They were appointed by the apostles or the apostles' designates and set aside by the laying on of hands.⁹

The presbyters were the outstanding members of their congregations, charged with special leadership responsibilities. These responsibilities seem primarily to have been ruling their communities, preaching and teaching.¹⁰ It appears that they were settled residents of the districts in which they served.

It seems apparent that they undertook their responsibilities collegially since they were almost always mentioned collectively.

And the disciples [at Antioch] determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brethren who lived in Judea; and they did so, sending it to the elders [i.e., presbyters] by the hand of Barnabas and Saul. (Acts 11:29F)

When Paul and Barnabas came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles, and the elders . . . (Acts 15:4)

⁸J. B. Lightfoot, Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians (London: Macmillan, 1903), p. 192.

⁹Acts 14:23, Titus 1:5. ¹⁰I Timothy 5:17-22.

Is there any among you sick: Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord . . . (James 5:14)

Another term which is evidently used almost as a synonym for presbyter, though with much less frequency, is episkopos. Whereas presbyter is a word coming from Jewish usage, episkopos was a common term in Greek government, social, and religious organizations.¹¹ It bears the meaning of overseer or superintendent. Episkopos has regularly been translated into English by its derivative, "bishop."

This term will assume a major role in this study, not because of its use in the New Testament where it appears only five times and then always with the same intent as presbyteros,¹² but because of the importance it has come to assume in later church history and because of the responsibility which it suggests of oversight of the church's life.

There is one informative use of a derivative of episkopos in the Acts of the Apostles. It appears in the narration of Matthias' selection as the successor to Judas Iscariot as one of the twelve. The Revised Standard Version of the Bible translates Acts 1:20 this way: "His office let another take" The word translated office is episkope, which suggests a bishopric. It would probably be reading too much into this one appearance of the word episkope to link the office of the twelve with the ministry of bishops, and yet there certainly is the suggestion that oversight or superintendency is related to the apostolic office.

It is important to note that in the epistle to the Ephesians,

¹¹Lightfoot, p. 95. ¹²Ibid., p. 95.

which in all likelihood should be dated between the Acts and the later epistles, neither the office of presbyter nor bishop is mentioned. Ephesians speaks of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers,¹³ but not the terms which would later form the basis of the classic threefold ministry: deacon, presbyter, and bishop. Ephesians is very much concerned with the church's ministry; and if there had been a standardized organization current in the church, it should have been described in this letter. Because no such model appears, it is probable that the church's organizational structure was in flux at that point in time. According to Principal Robinson, "It is true that some contend that the full scheme of ministry was revealed to 'The Twelve' by Christ after his resurrection, but the Acts of the Apostles lends no colour to this theory. It rather shows a ministry being evolved to meet the needs of the growing organism."¹⁴ And the World Council of Churches publication One Baptism, One Eucharist, and a Mutually Recognized Ministry concludes, "Today there is growing agreement among scholars that the New Testament presents diverse types of organization of the Christian communities, according to the difference of authors, places and times."¹⁵

From the foregoing type of data, it is possible to make some statements about the form of the church in the New Testament.

(1) It was developing and not static. There were marked

¹³Ephesians 4:6. ¹⁴Robinson, p. 128.

¹⁵One Baptism, One Eucharist, and a Mutually Recognized Ministry (Faith and Order Paper no. 73) (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1975), p. 37.

differences from place to place, time to time, and writer to writer.

(2) There were people set aside to undertake various responsibilities. Some of these were based in local congregations while others had responsibility for church administration and instruction over wider geographical areas.

(3) There was always a high degree of responsibility to the one church. There was frequent sharing of talent and material support. When officers were selected there was apparently a practice of their being ratified and ordained to their offices by general officers of the church. There does not appear to be any support for isolation nor independency. The chief reality was the one great church, the church catholic, which existed in the several communities of the Mediterranean world and the local community was always an extension of the church catholic. The church catholic was not a creation of the several communities.

(4) There was an emerging prevalence of the pattern of local presbyter/bishops resident in each local congregation which by the time of the Pastoral Epistles seems to have become normative.

(5) There was also a pattern of a presiding officer who was assisted by his presbyters. This is evidenced by the system described in the Jerusalem church at the time of the Acts where we read repeatedly of James (the Lord's brother) and the presbyters in that church as though they formed an association or society with James as the president or overseer. J. B. Lightfoot refers to this as an example

of the episcopal office, "at least in a rudimentary form" ¹⁶

The unity of the one church, the interrelatedness of the various congregations, the collegiality of presbyters, and the necessity for responsible oversight of the church's work and teaching appear to be central elements in the New Testament records of the developing church.

¹⁶Lightfoot, p. 198.

Chapter II

THE DEVELOPMENT OF EPISCOPACY IN THE CHURCH CATHOLIC

Toward the end of the era in which the New Testament was being written, in the last decades of the first century A.D., there is a period of about fifty years which are shrouded in mystery as far as the life and growth of the Christian church are concerned. We are dealing with a period beginning about A.D. 70. It is during this era, from which the records are extremely sparse and suspect, that the monarchical episcopate was developed. The phrase "monarchical episcopate" refers, as one would deduce, to a style of ecclesiastical order in which the bishop was the veritable ruler of his community and the source of its validity. It may be that a factor in this development was the threat of the gnostic movement within Christianity and the need of a powerful, recognized, effective organization to combat it. However, Elaine Pagels describes the development of gnosticism and the rise of the episcopate as taking place concurrently as impulses to different concepts of the nature of God and different political tenets.¹ By the time that the records resume with some clarity and credibility, a remarkable change has taken place in the governance of the church from the state of diversity and flux which seem to have prevailed throughout the New Testament era.

No longer are there itinerant and evangelizing apostles admonishing, encouraging, and instructing the congregations of Christendom, but there are settled bishops who from their metropolitan

¹Elaine Pagels, The Gnostic Gospels (New York: Random House, 1979), p. 46.

sees govern, teach, and shepherd the congregations in their respective districts. This they are doing with the assistance of presbyters and deacons who represent and aid them in the various functions of ministry among the people.

Though this was probably a format which spread gradually through the church and was applied unevenly in its early days, it is truly remarkable how quickly and uniformly it became the standard model of ecclesiastical operation.

Perhaps as early as A.D. 100, St. Ignatius of Antioch was writing to fellow bishops in a style which plainly indicates that he looked upon the episcopal system as the normative polity for the churches with which he was directly concerned.² Robinson comments on the opinion of some scholars that Ignatius was "bishop mad" in this way:

If we regard Ignatius as "mad" at all, we must regard him as "mad" for the unity of the Church and that at a time when the Church was being threatened by division on every hand, and especially by Gnosticism. He sees no safeguard against this awful thing division except allegiance to the individual he calls a Bishop.³

The author of the Clementine Homilies, c. A.D. 150, advocated the monarchical episcopate as essential for the welfare of the church. "The multitude of the faithful must obey a single person, that so it may be able to continue in harmony." He further speaks of every bishop

²J. B. Lightfoot, St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians (London: Macmillan, 1903), p. 210.

³William Robinson, Essays on Christian Unity (London: James Clarke, 1923?), p. 141.

as occupying the place or seat of Christ.⁴

So we have very early evidence of highly developed conceptions of the place of the episcopate in the church. The model was so widely accepted that Adolph von Harnack was able to record: "In the second half of the third century there were no longer any churches except remote communities, where the only requirement was to preserve the Catholic faith; the bishops had to be obeyed."⁵

Most speculation regarding the rise of the episcopate will remain simply that. However, there are some important occurrences about the time of the beginning of this period of profound silence. The church lost its three primary leaders of the apostolic age: Peter, Paul and James. And the Jerusalem church was dispersed in the course of the Roman destruction of that city. Within what was surely a brief timespan, the whole fabric of the church's life and the most visible symbols of its unity were lost.

J. B. Lightfoot hypothesizes that the only members of the Christian community who had sufficient authority and who certainly would have had reason to see that the church was organized to present a continuing and united witness were the apostles who remained following the deaths of Peter, Paul and James. He notes particularly the activity in Asia Minor of John, Philip, and Andrew.⁶

⁴Ibid., p. 238.

⁵Adolph Harnack, History of Dogma, II (New York: Dover, 1961), p. 85.

⁶Lightfoot, p. 201.

This theory could fit the circumstances of the day, and it also holds a possible answer as to why the further work of the apostles is not recorded. That is: Their evangelical labors had now been transferred to the catholic church which they had organized. This church was worthy of the name catholic because it was united in faith; service; and fact, because of a universally recognized, visible ordering of its ministry.

Lightfoot does not support the idea that the bishops were the successors of the apostles. He notes that the apostles were far-ranging ambassadors of Christ whereas the bishops were quite localized in their ministries. And the collegial model of the bishop's presiding over a council of presbyters leads to the impression that the office of the episkopos as it would emerge in the second century came about as a result of the natural tendency of any council to choose a presiding officer.⁷ This application of the title, episkopos, to a presiding officer coincides well with its original Greek usage discussed in Chapter I of this study.

Charles Gore, another nineteenth century commentator on the Christian ministry, and an ardent Anglican advocate of the doctrine of apostolic succession vigorously refuted Bishop Lightfoot's conclusion regarding the manner in which the episcopate arose.

Dr. Lightfoot says: "it became necessary to appoint special officers;" "it became necessary to provide for the emergency by definite officers" (p. 184). Was the Church ever without special officers constituted by divine appointment in the Apostles? Was not the household divinely planned so as to include commissioned

⁷Ibid. p. 207.

stewards?

I cannot see how Dr. Lightfoot, accepting the Gospels, the Acts, and the Pastoral Epistles, can answer in the negative.⁸

Gore was convinced that authority in the church comes from above through a descending pyramid: From Christ; to the apostles; to their successors, the bishops; to every presbyter; deacon, and lay member of the church. Any ministry which is generated from a consensus of the membership or any part of the membership was for him without validity.⁹ And he certainly is not alone in this opinion.

Lightfoot ascribed the rise of the episcopacy mainly, "To the dissensions of Jew and Gentile converts and to the disputes of Gnostic false teachers"¹⁰

Gore, on the other hand, spoke of the apostles' transmission of their pastoral office (which he distinguished from their intransmissible office of bearing witness to the Lord's resurrection) in a manner which denies that it was in any way a response or reaction to contemporary issues.

It was thus intended that there should be in every Church, in each generation, an authoritative stewardship of the grace and truth which came by Jesus Christ and a recognized power to transmit it, derived from above by apostolic descent.¹¹

John Knox discusses the rise of the monarchical episcopate in a manner which takes account both of pressure "from the bottom" and

⁸Charles Gore, The Ministry of the Christian Church (New York: Pott, 1893), p. 356.

⁹Ibid., p. 357. ¹⁰Lightfoot, p. 206.

¹¹Gore, p. 70.

pressure "from the top."¹² He suggests that there were originally boards of elders in the majority of congregations. However,

As the elder system proved too cumbersome, one of the elders would naturally be recognized as the leading elder and would eventually become the bishop in the monarchical sense. Presumably at the beginning it would have been the congregations or local boards of elders who chose and appointed bishops.¹³

This is not dissimilar to Lightfoot's hypothesis and represents pressure from the bottom.

Pressure from the top occurred when an apostle, most notably St. Paul, left certain congregations in the care of deputies when he was unable to supervise their ministries himself.¹⁴

Knox concludes that both of these pressures were taking place concurrently in various parts of the church and would coincide in the institution of episcopacy. If this be the case, some bishops stood in succession to the apostles and others did not. In Knox' words: "Indeed, it is certain that no single line of development lies back of the second-century episcopacy." But, "Surely one is not mistaken in seeing a connection of some kind between the primitive apostles and such metropolitan bishops."¹⁵

The roots of the historic episcopate are lost. We can only say that within decades of the close of the New Testament era the office of bishop was being established throughout the church as the locus of doctrinal, liturgical, and administrative authority. As early as A.D.

¹²John Knox, The Early Church and the Coming Great Church (New York: Abingdon Press, 1955), p. 123.

¹³Ibid. ¹⁴Ibid., pp. 124 ff.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 127.

110, St. Ignatius subscribed to the concept of a monarchical episcopate wherein each bishop exercised powerful leadership in his diocese. This episcopate followed the pattern of there being a bishop in each city or district who presided over a council of presbyters who assisted him and functioned as his representatives in the various congregations.

Besides the presbyters, the bishops also were assisted by deacons who performed various ecclesiastical functions either in the local congregation or in the bishops' own offices.¹⁶ In the earliest days it appears that presbyters and deacons had quite different responsibilities. Presbyters were charged with liturgical/sacramental and pastoral functions while deacons were ordained to perform duties of a more temporal nature such as being treasurers, almoners, secretaries and the like. Within the course of time, the office of deacon became only a way station in the course of becoming a presbyter. It is well to note that through much of the church the diaconate is being reappraised and reinvigorated.¹⁷

By the end of the second century, it appears that the monarchical episcopate was practically universal with every important church, with the possible exception of Egypt, having its bishop.¹⁸ The church fathers, Ignatius, Irenaeus, and Cyprian, all emphasized the

¹⁶James Hastings (Ed.) Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916) VIII, 659 ff.

¹⁷One Baptism, One Eucharist, and a Mutually Recognized Ministry (Faith and Order Paper no. 73) (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1975), p. 36.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

centrality of the bishop in preserving the unity of the church.

This pattern prevailed for centuries and today remains the model of church government for two-thirds to three-fourths of the world's Christians.¹⁹ The model has understandably been modified in its various manifestations. The rise of the Roman papacy, and its attendant hierarchical form has marked the episcopacy of a large part of the church. The isolationism, suppression, and captivity of large parts of the Eastern Orthodox and Coptic communities, to say nothing of the anathematization of these last by orthodoxy, have influenced the way those churches have maintained the episcopate. The national origins of Anglicanism, its relationship to the English crown and the university; and its close contact with reformation theology have caused the episcopal office in that communion to take on a certain character.

But all these have retained the ancient pattern of consecrating a bishop to be the chief pastor, teacher, and administrator of a geographical district. He is the symbol of the church's unity and desire for faithfulness in doctrine and service. And this bishop with his presbyters, deacons, and indeed the whole laity of that district constitutes the church in a given place.

¹⁹Information Please Almanac (New York: 1979), p. 430.

Chapter III

THE MATTER OF OVERSIGHT AMONG THE DISCIPLES

One need not be a scholar of church history to know that the catholic church has always had its tensions and factions. From time to time these have rent the fabric of Christ's church which he desires to be whole. Despite the factionalism which resulted in even major schisms such as the monophysite controversy in the wake of the Council of Chalcedon and the break between eastern and western Christendom in A.D. 1054, the office of bishop retained centrality for all branches of the church. And this fact has made the reunion of those church bodies conceivable as old wounds heal and new consensus arises regarding doctrine.

The great schism which has fractured the western church from 1517 to the present differed from previous major divisions by the loss of the historic episcopate in a large segment of the church. Doubtless it appeared to some reformers that the episcopate was a root cause of the malaise which they saw destroying the church. According to Anthony Tyrrell Hanson:

It would probably be true to say of Luther, as it certainly is of Calvin, that he did not consciously desire to originate a completely new ministry. Luther only began ordaining others when the supply of regularly ordained priests began to run out. His first ordination was in 1525 in Wittenberg. In any case he would no doubt have maintained that the authority given to every Christian in baptism authorized them, acting as the local Christian Church, to ordain to the ministry in certain circumstances. It does not seem likely that Luther (still less Calvin) would ever have accepted as a minister anyone who had never received any authority from any body of Christians. Both these reformers were in an unprecedented situation: church authority as constituted in their day had, they believed, to be repudiated. From where were they to draw authority for the ministry in the future? It is to Luther's credit, not to his

discredit, that he fell back on the Church as constituted in the sacrament of baptism.¹

Moreover, Hanson says of Calvin:

[He] maintained that the system of Church government which he expounds was preserved intact in the early Church till A.D. 400 and later, and was only obscured with the rise of the lord bishop, or bishop with secular office, in the Dark Ages.²

Probably the fact that bishops themselves remained loyal to the Pope and did not join the reformers was also responsible for the absence of episcopacy in areas where the reformation became strong.

However, where the bishops joined the reformation as in Sweden and England, the episcopacy has been retained as a major feature of the ecclesiastical order.³

It can be noted here that protestant communities have reinstituted the episcopal office as a general ministry of oversight of several congregations although these have not restored the historic continuity with the catholic office of bishop. Among these would be primarily the various Methodist churches although this classical use of the title, bishop also appears among such diverse manifestations as the Amish, Mormons, some Brethren, and even a group of black congregations affiliated with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) known as the Church of Christ - Disciples of Christ, which are located in the Carolinas and metropolitan New York.

The severing of the reformed churches from the catholic tradition in regard to the episcopate poses a real dilemma to the future unity of

¹Anthony Tyrrell Hanson, The Pioneer Ministry (London: SPCK, 1975), p. 135.

²Ibid., p. 125. ³Ibid., p. 135.

the church. No matter how far Christians may go together in terms of agreement on doctrine and ministering to a needy world in the name of the same Lord, the line will be drawn as far as mutual recognition of ministries and sacraments is concerned. There can be great love, respect, and cooperation but not one church. The historic office of bishop is the sine qua non of perhaps 75% of the church, and this loyalty is grounded in experience as well as tradition.

The episcopal office has provided a center of unity, continuity, strength, wisdom, motivation, spirituality, and hope for Christians in times of adversity and confusion. And in times of wealth and security, it has enabled the church to speak a prophetic word of admonition and effectively deploy much of that wealth into important human and spiritual undertakings.

Contrariwise, perhaps in part because they have been bereft of an effective concept of episcopal oversight and the commitment to unity which it represents, protestant communities have fallen into an ever more shattered state which frequently has been the result of motives which were not appropriate to the gospel of Christ and which often have proven to be fleeting.

This is not to commend all the individual bishops of the church catholic carte blanche for the conduct of their ministries throughout two millenia. Nor is it to absolve those whose misdeeds have aroused the righteous indignation of reformers through the ages. It is to commend the office as a virtuous attribute of the church which can allow it to maintain wholeness in the face of dissension and allow it to look beyond the exigencies of the moment to a longer and wider

comprehension of its mission. Sometimes this office is abused, but where it exists the church remains united even after the abuse and therefore in a position to correct the mistakes which may have been made.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) arose from the thought and work of three one-time Presbyterians and their followers who undertook their ministries on the frontier of the United States in the early and middle nineteenth century. The three were Thomas Campbell, an ordained minister of the Associate Synod of the Presbyterian Church who was a Scotsman of Ulster emigrated to western Pennsylvania; his son Alexander, who became disenchanted with the Presbyterianism of his day because of its narrowness and rigidity and who resided in the panhandle of Virginia; and Barton W. Stone who reached similar conclusions to the Campbells regarding the inability of contemporary church structures to proclaim faithfully the word of God while serving a Presbyterian charge in Kentucky.

The movement which these men and their followers initiated arose within the reformed tradition which had long been separated from any affiliation with the catholic episcopate, indeed, which often vilified that office. This movement was also decidedly anti-clerical in its beginning days, probably in no small part because the Presbyterian clergy had been markedly antagonistic to the openness and freedom which the soon-to-be called Disciples advocated in terms of offering the eucharistic meal to all believers and requiring only the confession of the messiahship of Jesus as the proper test of faith, thus relegating the creeds to the level of opinion.

Certainly a far thing from the minds of any of these leaders in those days would have been the value of the historic episcopate for the life of the church. In fact the last thing they desired was another fracture in the body of Christ. They did not at the beginning conceive of establishing a new ecclesiastical community. They saw their movement as exactly that, a movement within existing structures, a movement toward union of the whole of Christ's church by means of eliminating creeds and adhering to the Bible as the only rule of faith and practice. They saw this as a rule which would be acceptable to all Christians, a most common denominator--a catholic rule.

As the nineteenth century progressed, the Disciples evolved rather rapidly into another denomination as they successively severed their ties with the Presbyterians and Baptists and developed an identity of their own. They have always referred to themselves as a movement, but in latter days that term seems to bespeak a hope or commitment to church unity more than a reality.

With their transition into a new denomination, there soon appeared a need for structures of organization. But because of their extreme anxiety about being a denomination, the issue of ecclesiology was handled very cautiously. The Disciples were committed to the all-sufficiency of the Bible in governing the life of the church. But the Campbells seem to have been somewhat simplistic in their appraisal of the ability of all readers of scripture to come to similar conclusions when studying holy writ.

There are several strands of thinking which influenced the manner in which Disciples polity developed.

(1) There was the strong and recurring anticlericism which has already been mentioned. That a preacher should make his living from preaching was at times considered nothing short of scandalous.

(2) The larger part of early congregations had defected from the Baptist association among which Campbell and his followers had sojourned for several years. These congregations had been steeped in congregational principles.

(3) Alexander Campbell and his followers were deeply committed to American democratic principles and institutions and strongly defended individual rights and freedom.

(4) The Disciples were not intending to bring into being an ecclesia but saw themselves as bringing to fruition the work begun by Christ and his apostles. Consequently they were not so much concerned with structures as proclaiming the word which they believed would somehow result in church unity once heard and believed. In this respect they were in a similar position to the apostolic church, which we have seen did not establish an effective framework for community action and responsibility but left this for the next generation.

(5) As it became apparent that they were indeed a definable church community, they predictably looked to the Bible for guidelines for organization. Alexander Campbell discovered a three-fold ministry which was in many ways different from that which we have already described as emerging in the catholic tradition.

As the Christian system is a perfect system, it . . . provides for its own perpetuity . . . by creating all necessary offices and filling them with suitable persons. We have said these offices are three, and are perpetual because of necessary existence. Bishops, whose office it is to preside over, to instruct, and to edify the community Deacons, or servants - whether called

treasurers, almoners, stewards, doorkeepers, or messengers They are called and commissioned . . . to serve in any of these capacities. Evangelists . . . as the term indicates, are persons devoted to the preaching of the word, to the making of converts, and the planting of churches.⁴

This system differs from the classical catholic model in that, first, bishops were plural in each congregation and of the same order as presbyters which we have already seen was the New Testament pattern. The term elder has been used most frequently for this office among Disciples. Next, this system of Campbell's does away with the concept of a pastor, for presbyters are plural and non-professional. And then, there is the addition or revival of the office of evangelist which sounds very much like the ancient apostolic office which may in turn form the basis of what would become the episcopate. In their early days the Disciples did have individuals who practiced this kind of itinerant preaching ministry.⁵ When there was no such evangelist present, the community would gather for the eucharistic meal (as was its weekly practice) presided over by their local bishops or elders, but may well not have had any sermon at all.

With these elements in their background, it is not difficult to see how local autonomy came to appear to many to have been the Disciples norm for church organization. But Alexander Campbell himself, if not his followers, was too astute a student of scripture and the history of the church to accept that stance.

⁴Alexander Campbell, The Christian System (Cincinnati: Central Book Concern, 1839), pp. 83-84.

⁵Lester G. McAllister and William E. Tucker, Journey in Faith (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1975), pp. 166 ff.

Campbell's writings and addresses reveal some rather concrete evidence that this was not how he conceived the proper ordering of Christ's people. At the very least he envisioned congregations united for undertaking certain ministries. ". . . A combination . . . of churches is essential to accomplish some of the great objects of Christian . . . humanity."⁶

Earlier he had written: "If Christ have a kingdom on earth . . . it must, then, have some ways and means of attaining and securing the ends of its existence . . . , bishops or overseers to attend to such matters. The name imports supervision, and indicates authority. But beyond a single community, unless by concert or previous agreement, or by some constitutional provision, a single bishop's jurisdiction extendeth not."⁷ The possibility is here presented of a bishop's authority being extended by consent beyond a single community. And, of course, the definition of community is open to congregational or diocesan understanding, although Campbell himself appears at this point to have been confining his remarks to a congregational setting.

Later in the same article, he becomes more explicit. "[The New Testament] inculcates a general superintendency of districts and cities by those who preside over the churches in those districts, that is it makes it the duty of the Christian ministry, by whatever name it may be called, to take care of the common interests of the kingdom in those

⁶Alexander Campbell, "Conventions," The Millennial Harbinger VII (September, 1850), pp. 500 f.

⁷Alexander Campbell, "The Nature of the Christian Organization," The Millennial Harbinger VI (February, 1842) pp 59 ff.

places and districts in which it is located and resident."⁸

And again in this same article which he entitled, "The Nature of the Christian Organization," referring particularly to the Baptists, he says:

Still in the fierce democracy of their congregational movements and disciplinary proceedings, they have been the most disputatious, feeble, and factional people on earth. They are, in the most important and essential of all the ends and uses of government, under the chances of a gunarchy.⁹

Sexism aside, Campbell was not comfortable with a congregational approach to church government and could have predicted the destiny of his own movement had he foreseen the strong influence that that polity would exercise in its development. In his debate with Bishop Purcell of Cincinnati, he states:

Let no one imagine, however, that I am at all opposed to order and government in the church. As far as concerns oversight, or the having of bishops to preside over the flock, I am an Episcopalian. I am for having presbyters or elders in every church. I do not believe in a church without presbyters or bishops.¹⁰

Campbell, however, was unable to institutionalize his professed order. Doubtless the sociological realities of the frontier and the independence of his followers were partly the reason. But perhaps more was the fact that he embodied in himself the episcopal office of general overseer. It was not by accident that he was and is widely referred to as Bishop Campbell. No other episcopate could emerge among the Disciples. It was already firmly established. He was the spiritual leader of the

⁸Ibid., p. 62.

⁹Ibid., p. 61.

¹⁰Alexander Campbell and John B. Purcell, A Debate on the Roman Catholic Religion (Cincinnati: James, 1837) p. 37.

whole movement and at his death in 1866, there was no structure left strong enough to overcome the congregationalism which he sometimes deplored but which had become the major style of church life among Disciples and in America even for Roman Catholics and Episcopalians according to a prominent student of ministry in that latter church, Urban T. Holmes, III.¹¹

The gap which Campbell's death left was partly filled by the editors of the various journals which became the major connectional medium for the congregations. Through these the faithful were instructed, the Disciples addressed contemporary issues, news of the brotherhood was communicated, and great ecclesiastical debates were carried on well into the twentieth century. The editors have been called the bishops of the second generation.¹² But their status was certainly questionable, their constituencies evanescent. Any oversight of the church which they may have provided was of a charismatic nature and not capable of giving direct, responsible, and transmittible leadership. The early, remarkable growth of the Disciples was greatly slowed in this period and dissension proliferated. Besides this loss of leadership which attended Campbell's death, the Civil War had sown seeds of disunity within the movement which would only appear after another generation had passed. Moreover, great struggles over theology, biblical interpretation, and ecclesiology were developing among the Disciples as well as within the whole of the church. With no unifying,

¹¹Urban T. Holmes, III, The Future of Ministry (New York: Seabury Press, 1971), p. 87.

¹²McAllister and Tucker, p. 178.

accepted leadership, no structures for general oversight, the great divisions which took place within the restoration movement through the first half of the twentieth century were inevitable.

Through the first century and a half of the Christian Church's (i.e., the Campbell-Stone movement's) existence, two extremely important developments were taking place with regard to church order neither of which fitted into Campbell's three-fold ministry described above.

First was the evolution of the office of minister or pastor. Because of the pervasive anti-clericalism and the authority vested in the lay leadership both to govern the congregations and to perform the liturgical offices of the church, there was and has remained a great deal of ambiguity regarding the trained, professional ministry.¹³ (However, it should be noted that very early in the history of the movement Alexander Campbell himself was ordained by the Christian Association of Washington, Pennsylvania, which was the first gathering of the Campbells' followers. Besides this in 1818 Alexander Campbell founded the Buffalo Seminary for the purpose of training ministers for the fledgling movement.) There are no functions reserved to those ordained to this office which cannot be and are not regularly performed by the eldership of the church. In fact it is quite irregular among Disciples for the pastor of a congregation to offer eucharistic prayers as this is a responsibility of the plural eldership which for this denomination has occupied in each congregation the New Testament office

¹³Ronald E. Osborn, "Theological Issues in the Restructure of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)" Mid-Stream, XIX (July, 1980), p. 301.

of presbyter/episkopos.

As individuals were becoming more numerous who were seeking full-time, professional ecclesiastical offices among the Disciples, congregations were also becoming more aware of the importance of employing such people to carry on the day to day ministries of teaching, preaching, pastoral care, and administration of parish life which could not be well performed by untrained, volunteer lay workers. Partly in response to this need for a trained ministry, a large and varied educational system arose which consisted of every kind of institution from one room, one teacher Bible schools which often happily ceased to exist within a matter of weeks, to well conceived and well supported colleges and universities with broad curricula and fully accredited graduate seminaries. And there was every gradation in between.¹⁴

The order of the ministry as Disciples now refer to this office, has come very much to resemble the office of presbyter in other Christian communions. But this nomenclature was already reserved from Campbell's ecclesiology to the plural, congregational eldership. This lateness and hesitance in the development of the order of ministry is not to indicate that the office is disdained and without authority among Disciples. It is usually a revered and respected office, and the Christian Church pastor is generally comparable to pastors of other "mainline" denominations in education and ability. But his office has arisen as an appendage and not a central feature of church organization. Though the pastor is often central to congregational life and worship

¹⁴McAllister and Tucker, pp. 161 ff.

by virtue of his own stewardship of the office, constitutionally he may be regarded as superfluous. Yet we know from experience that as soon as a congregation is larger than a few families who can effectively relate and minister to one another there is a desire for a designated, professional minister or pastor. (The very title, "pastor," has even been debated vigorously as to its appropriateness for Disciples but has along with the title "minister," attained common usage within the church.)

It is pertinent to note that there are congregations which do not adhere to the standard Disciple practice of the plural, lay presbyterate. There are congregations with a single lay elder and others which have no local eldership at all but for whom the presbyterial office is fulfilled by an ordained minister.¹⁵

So from a very early time there have been professional, ordained ministers serving in congregations with boards of lay elder/presbyters. The clarification of this ministry has been a long time in process and continues to occupy the thinking of Disciples of Christ.

The second important development in the ministry of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has been the evolution of the office of Regional Minister. From early times there has been a strong tendency among Disciples to affiliate in district associations and conventions.¹⁶ These, as has been mentioned, were seen as essential

¹⁵Community Christian Church in Beech Bottom, West Virginia, has no elders. Crow Christian Church in Beaver, West Virginia, and Fairview Christian Church in Union, West Virginia, each have a single elder. If this many exceptions to the norm appear in a single small region, it may well be that other examples exist elsewhere.

¹⁶McAllister and Tucker, pp. 166 ff.

to the church's ministry by Alexander Campbell. The problems which beset these district manifestations were enormous. They were not able to command any primary commitment from most members for this was reserved for the home parish. They had no authority to enforce any decision regarding faith, order, life, nor work on congregations nor individuals. There was great ambiguity about their mission in the church. Congregations withdrew their support from these associations whenever they were so inclined. And there was rarely visible, recognized leadership in the early days of these trans-congregational manifestations.

But they persisted, and they seemed to find their first motivating raison d'etre in the areas of evangelism and the establishment of new congregations. For this reason they commenced to hire some of the most able preachers and organizers as evangelists. The prototype for these evangelists was Walter Scott whom Alexander Campbell himself convinced to become a traveling evangelist for the Mahoning Association of Eastern Ohio.

Thomas Munnell, who served as corresponding secretary of the Kentucky Christian Missionary Society and later as corresponding secretary of the American Missionary Society in the last half of the nineteenth century, presented a careful description of his conception of the office of evangelist in his book, The Care of All the Churches. He called for an ecclesiology which would steer "between the Scylla of hierarchical despotism and the Charybdis of disintegrating and

dislocating independency"¹⁷ He perceived in the New Testament an interdependence among the congregations in the various regions and anticipated by eighty years the practice which would be adopted by Disciples,

if the Holy Spirit could thus speak of "the church" of Palestine, why is it wrong for us to speak of "the church" of Ohio, "the church" of Kentucky, or "the church" of Kansas, since in such territorial limits the congregations can all unite as one church to accomplish by united action what singly they could not do?¹⁸

Today the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) refers to its regional units as the Christian Church in Pennsylvania, the Christian Church in West Virginia, etc.

Munnell saw the necessity of an office of supervision to render pastoral, instructional, and organizational care to the congregations in each geographical church.

Now, whatever modern religious body had made no arrangements to do the same kind of work [as the New Testament apostles and evangelists] for the church today must lay no claim to apostolicity in this respect; and whatever theory of church government and of general co-operative organization stands in the way of supervision, and of such "care of all the churches," must support its pretensions from some other book than the Bible.¹⁹

This diocesan-type grouping of congregations early took the format of missionary societies which followed generally the geographical boundaries of the various states. These state societies employed evangelists who later would be called "state secretaries" or "executive secretaries." The state secretaries were vigorous, hard working men

¹⁷Thomas Munnell, The Care of All the Churches (St. Louis: Christian Publishing Co., 1888), p. 10.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 15. ¹⁹Ibid., p. 26.

who travelled extensively advising and encouraging the congregations in their districts and establishing new parishes.

Through their personal charisma and hard work, many of these secretaries became extremely influential and their offices became important centers for outreach and sustenance for the congregations and ministers within their geographical districts. One of the services which the secretaries came to render was the compilation of data concerning ordained ministers and the making available of these data to congregations seeking pastors. Ministerial relocation and counsel to the clergy and congregations devolved more and more on the secretaries. What was happening was that trans-congregational, episcopal oversight, which has always been a characteristic of the church and which was commended by Campbell to his own people, was appearing among the Disciples.

But as was the case with the local pastor, the lately resurfaced diocesan, episcopal office was not generally viewed initially as constitutional in the church. Rather it was seen as a convenience, a utilitarian measure which could be circumvented or subverted at will by congregations or pastors.

The ancient model of a diocesan bishop and council of presbyters was not visible for those who would see it. There was, however, no real authority accorded to this system; and it remained optional and auxiliary to the widely accepted notion of congregational autonomy.

Yet for many the ancient pattern became an ever more attractive format for churchly organization. It allowed for more

effective allocation of resources, better relocation procedures for pastors, counsel for troubled congregations, support for mission parishes. It gave a visible locus for participation in the wider church and a center for expressing unity. Essential to this pattern was the office of secretary who was now beginning to be called an area minister or executive minister. Such a change in nomenclature reveals an important change in the conception of the office.²⁰

With the rise of the diocesan pattern, a concurrent series of schisms were taking place within the restoration movement begun by Stone and the Campbells. In 1906 the Churches of Christ removed their statistics from those of the Disciples and listed as a separate communion in the United State Census.²¹ This removed a large number of theologically conservative and organizationally ultra-congregational parishes from the fold of the Disciples. But the fragmentation was not yet complete for within the remaining parishes there was polarization taking place between what came to be known as the "independent" and "cooperative" factions. Among other differences the independent churches were doctrinally more conservative and ecclesiologically more congregational than the cooperative churches. The independents were laying more stress on the restoration of so-called New Testament Christianity while the cooperatives were advocating the wholeness and unity of the church, catholicity. The two major themes of the Disciples movement had now become the horns of a dilemma. The

²⁰Osborn, p. 304. ²¹McAllister and Tucker, p. 251.

cooperative people were elevating the idea of "Christian Church" while the independents hewed to the line of congregationalism by emphasizing that they were "Christian Churches." In the introduction to his chronicle of this unhappy time, Stephen J. Corey comments:

The controversy discussed in this volume has been a development in antagonism to the regular and ordered life of the Disciples of Christ through a period of approximately fifty years [the first half of the twentieth century] growing more and more inclusive and more and more caustic. It has finally resulted in separatism and distrust. The survey of these many years reveals a sad and divisive movement striking at the heart of the spirit of brotherhood and understanding.

This schism now expresses itself in separate conventions, separate youth meetings, separate missionaries, separate missionary support, a separate group of schools, distinctive periodicals and a separate doctrinal plea. In the latter, the almost total emphasis is not so much on Christian unity, either among the other Christian forces of the world or among ourselves. Rather, it is on the "Restoration" of primitive Christianity.²²

Through the 1950's and 1960's, the cooperative people proceeded to actualize their vision by formulating "The Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)" which was accepted at the International Convention at Kansas City, Missouri, in 1968. The heretofore designated "International Convention of the Christian Churches" would from thenceforth be the "General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)." As the Design called for ratification by congregations, the die was cast; and the movement was fractured once again.²³ The independent congregations were now calling themselves "The Non-denominational Fellowship of Christian Churches and Churches of Christ."

²²Stephen J. Corey, Fifty Years of Attack and Controversy, (St. Louis: The Christian Board of Publication, 1953), p. 1.

²³Osborn, p. 295.

They have few organizational connections with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) at all any more.²⁴ However, the long common heritage and personal relationships are understandably poignant and strong.

A central tenet of the Design for the Christian Church is the conception that the church appears in three manifestations: (1) the congregational, (2) the regional, and (3) the general church. Each is conceived as essential in the life of the whole church. None has precedence at the expense of another. Each has its ministry.²⁵

Now, finally, the ancient episcopal model is resuming its place in this denomination, not as an auxiliary appendage, but as a constitutional principle which is of the essence of the church.²⁶ For when we speak of the regional manifestation of the church, we are speaking of the province in which the Regional Minister undertakes his ministry. This is the title currently given most frequently to the holders of the office which has been known in the past as state evangelist, executive secretary of the state missionary society, president of the state society, etc. It seems not inappropriate to conclude that this is the same office of general oversight which has been known throughout church history as bishop.

In the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), there are now thirty-five well defined regions each of which is charged with

²⁴McAllister and Tucker, p. 33. ²⁵Osborn, p. 295.

²⁶Ibid., pp. 304 ff.

providing certain services to enabling certain ministries of the congregations. And yet the regional churches no longer exist simply as instruments for the congregations to use at will. They have their own life and purpose. In typical Disciple fashion these regions are far from standardized. Some consist of many hundreds of congregations. Others have too few even to employ a superintending or episcopal officer. Two of them share a Regional Minister.²⁷ Still, when well conceived, they are able to provide valuable leadership, training, and spiritual sustenance to their people. Part of this conception is described in "The Guidelines for the Office of Regional Minister" in these terms:

Thus there is a collegiality, either formal or informal, in which [the regional minister] and his colleagues [the minister/presbyters of the region] partake as spiritual equals. Within this fellowship he serves as the spiritual leader with the responsibility placed on him by the Church to stimulate and guide his colleagues in their spiritual growth and in the fulfillment of their corporate responsibilities to the Church.²⁸

This sounds very much like a renewal of the ancient model of the presbyterial council presided over by the bishop. And even the allusion to spiritual equality which comes from the conviction that the Regional Minister shares with the other ministers of the region "a common ordination vow"²⁹ is not dissimilar from much ancient tradition.

²⁷The regions of South Idaho with eleven congregations and Utah with three congregations are currently served by a single Regional Minister.

²⁸Loren E. Lair, The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ and Its Future) (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1971), p. 303.

²⁹Lair, p. 302 f.

Lightfoot notes,

Even in the fourth and fifth centuries, when the independence and power of the episcopate had reached its maximum, it was still customary for a bishop in writing to a presbyter to address him as "fellow presbyter," thus bearing testimony to a substantial identity of order. Nor does it appear that this view was ever questioned until the era of the Reformation.³⁰

William Robinson comments further:

Are there really three orders in Episcopal Churches to-day? Are there not only two--Deacon and Priest? When we speak of orders we cannot find any other order than that of Priest for the Bishop. He is just a chief among Priests--a primus inter pares, although he has come to be invested with a new order He now has exclusive title of Bishop, though he is still a Presbyter in fact a President-Presbyter.³¹

Other duties assigned to the Regional Minister by the "Guidelines" include: pastoral care of congregations; pastoral care of ministers; involvement in ecumenical structures, mission, and enterprises; involvement in the life of the community and its social concerns. That is, generally performing "the pastoral, priestly, prophetic, teaching, administrative and other historic responsibilities which are characteristic of the Ordained Ministry."³²

The office is conceived in the "Guidelines" as operating under the authority of the Church, and therefore it has had conferred upon it a high level of recognition and validity. One of Alexander Campbell's persistent convictions was "vox populi vox dei."³³ When the people of

³⁰J. B. Lightfoot, St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians (London: Macmillan, 1903), p. 230.

³¹William Robinson, Essays on Christian Unity (London: James Clarke, 1923?), p. 148.

³²Lair, pp. 300-304 passim. ³³Campbell and Purcell, p. 44.

God speak, they speak as the incarnation of Christ.³⁴ It may well be then that he would have concluded that when the people assent to the naming of an episcopal officer, be he called Regional Minister or bishop, he bears a sacred trust.

It now appears that there has been evolved in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) an episcopate, an office of general oversight, which bears a striking resemblance to the episcopate of ancient catholic tradition modified by the democratic milieu in which it has developed.

The next task is to explore the opportunities, limitations, and responsibilities which this office presents to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Investigating the possibilities of the episcopal ministry in the church, our focus will be more on the present and future than the past.

³⁴William Barnett Blakemore, The Renewal of the Church III (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1963), p. 188.

Chapter IV

THE MINISTRY OF BISHOPS: THE EPISCOPAL IDEAL

As the ancient office of episkopos reappears within the context of a highly democratic community, which is marked by a history of rationalism and heterogeneous approaches to doctrine, parish life, and worship, it will display a peculiar style as well as a resemblance to and consistency with episcopacy as it has existed through the ages and around the world.

The purpose of this chapter will be to explore the historic responsibilities of episcopate as well as the demands which are laid on the office today. The matter of episcopal oversight will be discussed as it is developing within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and within other communities in the church. This will be approached by discussing the ministry under several headings which describe their duties. The primary sources of information regarding this subject are the documents which have been written recently in reference to the restructure of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the documents which were prepared and promulgated by the Second Vatican Council where the office of bishop occupied a central position, and the documents which are coming out of the work of the Consultation on Church Union which has incorporated the historic episcopate into its vision of an emerging Church of Christ Uniting. With nine other denominations the Disciples are an active participant group in this undertaking.

Throughout this chapter as indeed through this study masculine

pronouns will be used for convenience and perhaps as a recognition of the prevailing style in the church. But this in no way indicates that the episcopal office will be denied to women. Such a stance would be unacceptable to this author and to a large part of the membership of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

The terms bishop and episcopal officer will be used regularly during this chapter to indicate the office of general oversight of a geographical district even though these terms are not presently applied universally in the church. This means that the Regional Ministers of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) will for our purposes often be referred to under the titles bishop and episcopal officer.

Leadership

A primary characteristic of episcopacy and a vital function for the church is leadership. This mandate is expressed in the following statement in the "Guidelines for the Office of Regional Minister":

[The Regional Minister] has placed upon him the obligation to guide, teach, direct, admonish, nurture, sustain, and equip the Church to be increasingly obedient and faithful in its life and work to its Lord.¹

And with regard to the ordained clergy of the region his responsibility is described thus:

Within this fellowship he serves as the spiritual leader with the responsibility placed on him by the Church to stimulate and guide

¹ Loren E. Lair, The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and Its Future (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1971), p. 301.

his colleagues in their spiritual growth and in the fulfillment of their corporate responsibilities to the Church.²

Again and again in this document and in relation to numerous areas of church life the call is for leadership.

The "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" promulgated by the Second Vatican Council sounds the same theme.

By their [i.e., the bishops'] wisdom and prudence [our Lord Jesus Christ] directs and guides the people of the New Testament in its pilgrimage toward eternal happiness.³

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Bishops govern the particular churches entrusted to them as the vicars and ambassadors of Christ. This they do by their counsel, exhortation, and example, as well, indeed, as by their authority and sacred power.⁴

The episkopos or overseer as the very word implies is one who is in a position of widened vision wherefrom he can observe danger and opportunity for the church. He has been called by the church to see and to meet the needs which arise in various areas of church life.

One characteristic of this leadership is his visibility and identifiability. When one speaks of a bishop, the hearer knows that this is a recognized leader of the church. This recognizability is vital for leadership.

A college professor once remarked that it had always been a problem for Disciples that their church buildings were often plain and

²Ibid., p. 302.

³Walter M. Abbott (Ed.), The Documents of Vatican II (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), p. 41.

⁴Ibid., p. 51.

hidden on side streets whereas many other denominations made it a point to build their meetinghouses on main thoroughfares where they could be seen by all. Perhaps the deprecation of the episcopal office has been even more detrimental in providing visibility and prophetic voice to Disciples than the obscurity of their buildings.

Holmes discusses this issue in these terms:

Every Christian community has almost always been identified by its relation to its priest or pastor, and we ought to acknowledge this openly I am convinced it is what Ignatius meant when he identified the bishop with the Church. This is not an argument for or against Apostolic Succession; and it is certainly not a suggestion that "clergyman" is a word in the active voice and "layman" in the passive voice. It is simply to say that we acknowledge the sacramental person, the sine qua non of the cohesive Christian congregation, as the source of ministry.⁵

A visible leader around whom the church can unify and who can speak to the world with a voice of recognized authority is an important factor in ministry.

Servanthood

But as Ronald Osborn has reminded his readers, the style of leadership within a Christian community is characterized by servanthood or ministry.

The primitive bishop or overseer, episkopos, and elder, presbyteros, exercise rule, but as trustees; a bishop was Christ's steward, an elder was guardian of the flock. But the "leadership" claimed most eagerly the title of servanthood: "a slave of Jesus Christ."⁶

The bishops at the Second Vatican Council were not unmindful of

⁵Urban T. Holmes, III, The Future Shape of Ministry (New York: Seabury Press, 1971), p. 229.

⁶Ronald E. Osborn, In Christ's Place (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1967), p. 49.

the call to servanthood.

Since he is sent by the father to govern His family, a bishop must keep before his eyes the example of the Good Shepherd who came not to be ministered unto but to minister (cf. Mt. 20:28; Mk. 10:45), and to lay down His life for his sheep (cf. Jn. 10:11). Taken from among men, and himself beset with weakness, he is able to have compassion on the ignorant and erring (cf. Heb. 5:1-2). Let him not refuse to listen to his subjects, whom he cherishes as his true sons and exhorts to cooperate readily with him.⁷

The servant style is reiterated in the "Guidelines."

The Regional Manifestation will earnestly seek to submit itself and its ordered processes to the leading of God so that they may be his instruments in calling a person into this form of servanthood.⁸

A neat balance is called for between the style of powerful leader endowed by the church with authority and respect and the model of the faithful servant, emptying himself for his people and his God.

Appropriateness

There is a necessity then for the bishop to be sensitive in the various situations which require his ministry. His leadership/servanthood must be appropriate. Osborn, in discussing the ministry under the image, "Shepherds of the Church" speaks of this sensitivity or appropriateness. "By every appropriate means the minister will help each member grow in his vision and capacity as a servant of Christ."⁹ What Osborn considers requisite for ministers in general is certainly essential for bishops in particular.

From Vatican II we hear other calls for a ministry rendered with appropriateness. "To accomplish these things effectively [i.e.,

⁷Abbott, p. 52. ⁸Lair, p. 301.

⁹Osborn, p. 136.

the loving ministry of a father and pastor], a bishop . . . should arrange his life in such a way as to accommodate it to the needs of the time."¹⁰ And further:

the forms of the apostolate should be properly adapted to current needs not only in terms of spiritual and moral conditions, but also of social, demographic and economic ones. Religious and social surveys, made through offices of pastoral sociology, contribute greatly to the effective and fruitful attainment of that goal, and they are cordially recommended.¹¹

If an episcopate is indeed evolving among the Disciples, it will be only as effective as it is appropriate to the time and communities wherein it serves and to which and for which it speaks the word of God.

Copes and mitres, deferential forms of address, and retinues of attendants may serve to proclaim the word of God well in some sectors of the church. Among the Disciples a bishop will probably need less than this and more than this. Less of external insignia more of personal substance. (There is a long-standing tendency among Disciples that officers earn their authority or respect by the quality of their lives and service and that such authority and respect are not simply accorded by virtue of holding a position or title. In responding to a questionnaire which will be used extensively later in this study, one Regional Minister reflected this thinking by responding to a question regarding the feasibility of using the title bishop among Disciples in this way: "I am ambivalent primarily because the authority is earned. Name is not nearly as important as quality of person." We shall not debate the virtue of this kind of thinking

¹⁰Abbott, p. 408. ¹¹Ibid, p. 410.

in this study.) Each incumbent of the office has to pursue his ministry in ways which fit his community.

Exemplars

Because he is recognized as leader and model of servanthood in the community, it is not surprising to discover that the church has always looked to the bishop to be an example of right living. According to Bernard Cooke, "Perhaps no element in the history of Christian theology of ministry is more consistent than the idea that the bishop (and relatively the other clergy) is meant to be an example of Christian virtue."¹² (Cf. the parenthesis in the previous paragraph.)

Although this concept may seem somewhat quaint in a time when the church is in a state of upheaval and anguished dialogue regarding the moral life, it can well be advocated that especially in such a time the bishop has a responsibility to incarnate to the best of his knowledge and ability the style in which Christian people shall live in order to be most faithful to the gospel. We shall not seek to reintroduce the kind of thinking which for much of church history saw the Christian ideal as the monastic life of "spiritual athleticism" and called on bishops to be the very models of ascetic, contemplative discipline.¹³ And which finally came, in Cooke's words, to understand the bishop as, "[a man] constituted in a situation of holiness . . . not only a seeker after perfection; he is in a state of perfection

¹²Bernard Cooke, Ministry to Word and Sacraments (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), p. 264.

¹³Ibid., p. 265.

because he is the one who must communicate this to those below him in the church.¹⁴

Rather we shall be seeking for some style more like that which Cooke ascribes to the earliest days of the episcopate.

In the pre-Nicene epoch one seems to be still in the context of Paul's approach -- to be a disciple of mine as I am of Christ. That is to say, the bishop can point to his own behavior as a model for his flock because he is the heir of a tradition of discipleship, a way of life has been handed down to him by those who learned it (eventually) from the Master himself.¹⁵

It is in just this regard that the epistles I Timothy (3:1-7) and Titus (1:5-9) describe the attributes of a bishop in order that he might be a model and a venerable leader for his congregation.

The church continues to have need for a leadership which will provide her with examples of living which are appropriate for today and faithful to the call of Christ. We do not look for perfection but for models which can help us in our search for faithfulness to Christ in a time of dramatically changing values and circumstances. A responsible bishop will always be pursuing self-consciously a life style to which he can direct others as consistent with the requirements of the gospel and the realities of the age to the best of his knowledge and ability. He is not then "constituted in a situation of holiness," but he is a leader of a pilgrimage seeking for faithfulness.

Prophets and Teachers

Bernard Cooke relates the ministry of example to the ministry of prophecy: "There is considerable overlap between the notion of

¹⁴Ibid., p. 266. ¹⁵Ibid., p. 264 f.

prophetic witness and the witness expected of the Christian 'good example.'¹⁶ The risen Lord is proclaimed in word and action. One of the most important functions of the bishop is that of prophecy, declaring the word of God in every sector of human activity. This prophetic office extends into a teaching office as the bishop seeks to instruct his presbyters and the laity in Christian discipleship.

This is a central concern of "The Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church" from Vatican II.

Bishops should dedicate themselves to their apostolic office as witnesses of Christ before all men Their ultimate goal as bishops is that all men may walk "in all goodness and justice and truth." (Eph. 5:9)¹⁷

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They should also strive to use the various means at hand today for making Christian doctrine known: namely first of all, preaching and catechetical instruction . . .¹⁸

In A Plan of Union the Consultation on Church Union refers to this function:

The bishop shall do all that is in his power to preach and to teach creatively the Christian faith as expressed in the Scriptures and in Tradition and to interpret prophetically what God is doing in the world.¹⁹

Oversight of preaching and of instruction in the faith is an extremely important aspect of the episcopal office. It will be undertaken in every manner which is productive. Workshops, institutes, retreats, evaluative procedures, specially trained resource personnel, audio-visual presentations, and any other devices which prove

¹⁷Abbott, p. 404. ¹⁸Ibid., p. 405.

¹⁹Consultation on Church Union. A Plan of Union (Princeton: 1970), p. 51.

applicable in a region will be employed to proclaim the gospel and to enable clergy and laity to be effective preachers and teachers.

Candidates for the ministry ought certainly to be instructed and examined with regard to their ability to preach and teach as well as in regard to their fitness in other areas. The bishop will have a primary concern for this aspect of their formation.

As prophet and teacher the bishop also has a special concern for preserving the correct faith or purity of doctrine. This is not a standard concept in Disciple tradition and yet throughout the church's history it has been one of the chief functions of her bishops to expose heresy and false teaching. They have been in a position -- because of their charge to be in contact with the whole of church tradition, their collegial dialogue with other bishops, their responsibility for the welfare of the whole church, their not being beholden to any single locality or pressure group -- to detect bizarre teaching and behavior.

In an age when cultism and occultism, demagoguery and emotionalism are commonplace, the church needs episkopoi who can raise her vision, support those who are embattled in defending true Christianity, and expose those who diminish or subvert it.

Certainly bishops can fall victim to error; but because of the manner of their choosing and the scope of their office, it is less likely that they should be so misled than is the case for many others. Should they, themselves, become deviant from the faith they would certainly be removed from office.

The prophetic and teaching office requires two clear

attributes of the bishop. In order to be a prophet, he must be a person of authority both internal, assured of his own ability to edify the church, and external, regarded by the church as one from whom she can receive the word of God. In the end the church sees such authority as given by God and must not shrink from nor fear it but receive it as a gift. As a teacher the bishop must be a person of wisdom. He must certainly be educated and well read; but, moreover, he must be able to integrate and communicate knowledge.

In these regards the "Guidelines for Disciple Regional Ministers lists these requirements for the office:

- (b) A commitment to the continuation of his education through the discipline of regular, personal study and through availing himself of formal continuing educational opportunities.
- (c) Sufficient experience, leadership ability, maturity in personal relationships, emotional stability to merit the respect and confidence of those to be led.
- (e) A competency in the theological aspects of the Faith and a maturity in the spiritual and devotional disciplines of the Faith.
- (f) Inwardly secure, both spiritually and emotionally, courageous enough to be prophetic, complete devotion of himself to this office.²⁰

Alexander Campbell in discussing the earliest appearances of episcopacy in the church spoke to this office in these terms.

These bishops, though raised up and ordained by certain churches, possessed in some way a supervision over cities and districts of country beyond a single congregation. Bishops were ordained in every city so soon as congregations were formed, and these bishops by consultation, either by the way of occasional or periodical meetings, or by internuncios, messengers, or epistles, consulted, advised, and directed the whole communities of Christians in reference to all the kingdom. They were not lords over God's

²⁰Lair, p. 304.

heritage, over their faith or their conscience, or their estates; but they watched for their souls, and executed the laws of the kingdom.²¹

Although he believed that the episcopate was corrupted in the course of history, he certainly appreciated the need for the prophetic and instructional aspects of the office and the value for the continuing dialogue or consultation within and throughout the church.

In Chapter II of this study, it was noted that Bishop Lightfoot stated that the rise of the episcopate was occasioned by "the dissensions of Jew and Gentile converts" and the "disputes of Gnostic false teachers." The church has needed overseers throughout its history who could guard and proclaim powerfully the gospel and assist the whole church, lay and clerical, in receiving, living and sharing that faith.

Collegiality

An important concomitant of the bishops' ability to protect and proclaim the faith is the collegial character of the office. Bishops have never been seen as solitary officers in the church's life, but they are always in dialogue with their fellow bishops as well as the lay and clerical members of their diocesan or regional communities.

In discussing this aspect of episcopacy in regard to the office of Regional Minister among the Disciples, Loren Lair makes these comments:

²¹Alexander Campbell, "The Nature of the Christian Organization," The Millennial Harbinger VI (February, 1842), p. 60.

Every facet of the Church's life is affected by the office of regional minister. The persons filling that office affect not only the region served but the whole of the Christian Church as well. Therefore, a careful and representative selective process should be developed.

.....

. . . the regional ministers, together with the general minister and his associate ministers who serve as heads of the divisions of the general manifestation should meet annually for the specific purpose of study and consideration of matters affecting the spiritual health and welfare of the church.²²

It is well to note that the purpose of the annual meeting of the Regional Ministers and others listed above is conceived as having for its major purpose "matters affecting the spiritual health and welfare of the church." This certainly resembles the synods of bishops which have been an important factor in much of church life since early times.

The concept of collegiality among the Regional Ministers of the Disciples is strikingly similar to the interrelatedness envisioned by the Second Vatican Council for Roman Catholic bishops.

As lawful successors of the apostles and as members of the episcopal college, bishops should always realize that they are linked one to the other, and should show concern for all the churches.²³

To institutionalize this collegiality, the Council provided for a Synod of Bishops which would demonstrate that, "all the bishops in hierarchical communion share in the responsibility for the universal Church."²⁴

In the "Plan of Union" the Consultation of Church Union

²²Lair, p. 227. ²³Abbott, p. 400.

²⁴Ibid.

defines collegiality in these terms:

The bishop does not function as an independent or isolated individual, though he is individually responsible and accountable. No bishop can be completely autonomous in function.

The bishop becomes a member of the episcopal college by election, by ordination (consecration), and by continued communion with its members.²⁵

Collegiality is publicly symbolized in churches which maintain the historic episcopate by the presence and participation of at least three bishops in the ordination of a new bishop. This act signals the unity as well as continuity and interdependence among the holders of the office.

This collegial nature of the office helps to assure that the teaching and proclamation of the bishops will be informed by the deposit of faith in the whole church. Erroneous and bizarre manifestations of the faith will be exposed. There will be mutual support, study, consensus, and a sharing of the gospel, united in her mission, and reasonable in her decision making. The two way responsibility of the bishop, to his community and to his fellow bishops will have the effect of keeping the church attuned to its grass roots membership and yet highly responsible to the whole of the church. In short it will help maintain catholicity in the church.

The concept of collegiality is called for at another level even while it is being pursued by the bishops throughout the church. This second level is within the diocesan or regional manifestation of the church where the bishop functions as leader and pastor, as chairman of a council or presbyters. He becomes the central figure

²⁵ Consultation on Church Union, p. 50.

around which the church in his district forms and he has particular responsibility for giving his church cohesiveness and direction. Ideally he will forge the presbyters of his region into a team which will be able to provide its members with counsel, support, and assistance. As has been pointed out, this is the classic model of episcopacy which has prevailed from earliest times.

Pastors

Perhaps the most comprehensive rubric under which we shall discuss the ministry of the bishop is that of pastor.

Ronald Osborn comments:

The church must establish for our time a pastoral office with larger scope than the life of a congregation or the bounds of a parish . . . [The local pastor] lacks an adequate base, not for ministry to his own people, but for effective community shepherding.²⁶

Osborn proceeds to assert that most metropolitan executives in protestant churches have become too much "cogs in the ecclesiastical machine," and bishops in the catholic traditions "have dioceses too large for [effective] guardianship."²⁷

As Disciples and the church at large review the episcopal office, it is well to keep before us the ideal of pastoral oversight.

The breadth of this function is indicated in this paragraph from Bernard Cooke's Ministry to Word and Sacraments:

One of the most ambiguous terms used in explanations of the episcopal and presbyteral role is "the pastoral office." Grounded in the biblical imagery of the shepherd providing for his flock, the term can indicate that the one who holds the office is to do

²⁶Osborn, p. 140. ²⁷Ibid.

everything for his people that their spiritual well-being demands. Clearly, we are right back with the idea of an all-embracing ministerial post. The bishop is seen as both "pastor of the people" and "pastor of the pastors of the people." Practically, this has meant providing for all the needs of a parish or diocese.²⁸

Cooke, in agreement with Osborn, hastens to point out that especially in the case of bishops the role of pastor has been caught up in "ecclesiastical government" rather than centering on the ministry of word and sacrament.

In addressing episcopacy, the oversight of the church, we shall want to make certain that the holders of this office are able to function as pastors, guardians, not merely as executive bureaucrats mired in managerial undertakings.

As pastors they will be leaders in the liturgical life of their regions helping their people to praise God and offer prayer. The "Guidelines" call for Regional Ministers to be, "Responsible, directly or indirectly, for the liturgical functions of the Region . . ."²⁹ This office could well be extended to providing training and example for the laity and clergy of the region in ways in which the worship life of the congregations, families, and individuals might be enriched. This is especially important in a community such as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) where so much responsibility for worship has been distributed so widely with so little serious attention.

As pastor of the region, the bishop is charged with guiding the spiritual life of his people generally and presenting them with

²⁸Cooke, p. 212. ²⁹Lair, p. 302.

opportunities through worship, study, and pastoral guidance for spiritual growth. To this end the fathers at Vatican II wrote, "As those who lead others to perfection, bishops should be diligent in fostering holiness among their clerics, religious, and laity according to the special vocation of each."³⁰ This is an invaluable service which the bishop can render for his people and these times with their excesses of religious experimentation are ample testimony of a deep hunger for spirituality among men and women.

As pastor or guide the bishop will also keep before his people the social issues of the time. Whereas local congregations may well become insular and insensitive to the needs of humanity, or overwhelmed by and unaware of ways in which to address the needs of the world, the bishop by his perspective can keep his people's eyes on the demand of Christ that we feed the poor and minister to the oppressed and also present ways in which the church can respond.

From Vatican II:

The bishops should present Christian doctrine in a manner adapted to the needs of the times, that is to say, in a manner corresponding to the difficulties and problems by which people are most vexatiously burdened and troubled [They] should manifest the church's maternal solicitude for all men With a special concern they should attend upon the poor and the lower classes to whom the Lord sent them to preach the gospel.³¹

From the Consultation on Church Union:

[The bishop] should concern himself with such public issues as race relations, peace, poverty housing, urban development, conservation and environmental control, population problems, justice, the rule of law in society, and other contemporary problems of human relations to which Christ's mission is to be directed.³²

³⁰Abbott, p. 407. ³¹Ibid., p. 405.

³²Consultation on Church Union, p. 51.

From the "Guidelines":

[The regional minister is] to be responsible for stimulating, establishing and maintaining a strong and relevant involvement in the life of the community and its social concerns . . . which forms an integral and essential part of the mission of the Church.³³

In his role as pastor, the bishop stands in a position to see, designate, and address needs which might well be obscured by proximity or imperceptible because of distance.

As "pastor of the pastors of the people," the bishop will play a special role in the lives of the ministers within his region. His participation in their formation -- their instruction and examination -- has already been noted. Now we shall become more specific and enter into an area which represents a divergence from traditional Disciplespractice but a reentry into the dominant pattern of church practice.

The bishop has traditionally stood in a close relationship to the presbyters -- pastors, priests -- of his district. He shares with them and they with him in ministry. Generally through the church, until the Protestant Reformation, the bishop ordained, and throughout the catholic tradition still ordains, presbyters. With the loss of the episcopate, much of protestantism substitutes the ordination of presbyters by other presbyters. Because the presbyteral office was assumed within the Disciples by congregational elders, it was for a long time they who traditionally examined and approved candidates and performed the office of laying on hands in ordination. This was all conducted at the congregational level. This practice produced the

³³Lair, p. 302.

strange phenomenon of non-professional congregational officers approving and investing for service men and women who would enter a totally different form of ministry from their investors. Single congregations commissioned officers who would be expected to serve the whole church. Only in recent years have regions begun to exercise widening authority in examining, certifying, and ordaining candidates for the ministry.

Loren Lair has indicated the responsibility of the whole church for ordination and notes that, "The first General Convention [of the Disciples] in 1849 had before it a recommendation calling upon local congregations to request the aid of neighboring congregations in examining and ordaining men to be set aside for the ministry."³⁴ He concludes that regional responsibility for ordination is not a radical departure from much good Disciples thinking, and yet it was a hundred years and more following that convention and after the loss of many congregations that the Disciples were in a position to institutionalize that early recommendation.

The practice is quite common now among Disciples of having the Regional Minister, or his designate, or a member of his staff participate in ordinations, although congregations still play a central role and congregational elders still participate in the laying on of hands. In order to move toward an effective episcopal office and enable the person who holds that office to relate in a satisfactory manner to the ministry of a region, it will be necessary to see that every ordination is performed under the auspices of a regional church with

³⁴Ibid., p. 222.

an episcopal officer of the region presiding and imposing hands. In this way the collegiality, the catholicity, the unity of the church is safeguarded and the pastoral role of the bishop is exercised on behalf of the congregations and ministers who with him form a unit of the church.

This need not eliminate the role of congregations nor congregational officers from participating in the process of approving and ordaining ministers. It does establish the office of the bishop as central for the unity and continuity of the church.

A Plan of Union defines the ministry of the bishop at ordinations in these terms:

The bishop is a chief symbol and means of ministerial continuity in the church He presides at all services of ordination, along with representatives of other offices of the ordained ministry and of the ministry of lay persons. Thus within the whole people of God, the bishop personifies the fullness of the priestly ministry of Christ.³⁵

Beyond his participation in the formation and ordination of ministers, the bishop also will be in a position to be a pastoral overseer and consultant in locating them as pastors of congregations. Among the Disciples of Christ, it would not be desirable nor possible for any single individual to have complete authority in such a matter as this. The ministers themselves and congregations are accustomed and prepared to take a major role in the process of ministerial relocation. They are far too involved in their own destinies and too aware of their own responsibilities as agents of the church of Christ to surrender their roles in the relocation process. However, this

³⁵ Consultation on Church Union, p. 52.

participation need not eliminate the significant, pastoral responsibility of the episcopal officer of the region in the location of pastors.

Indeed the Regional Ministers already play an important part in preparing congregational pastoral search committees for their duties and providing them with the names of potential candidates for their pastorates. It is a standard practice of Regional Ministers to know the congregations of their regions well and to inform themselves regarding ministers seeking pastoral charges. Possessed of these data they are in a position to make well-advised suggestions both to parishes and ministers, and they regularly play key roles in the process of placement.

Ministerial location procedures are beyond the scope of this study and are properly receiving much attention throughout the church. What is germane here is the importance of the central role of the bishop in this task. His involvement is essential in maintaining the collegium, the self-conscious unity of congregations, presbyters, and bishops. The goal is not a monolithic, monarchical autocracy but, just exactly the opposite, a balanced, responsible team approach to a matter which is fundamental in the life of the whole church.

The pastoral function of the bishop will involve him in serving as a counselor and guide on those occasions when strife and tragedy occur within his regional church be this involving clergy, laity, or both. His interest will also be for those outside the church for he will seek to minister to all as a servant of Christ.

The "Guidelines" address this issue of pastorality in this

paragraph:

To implement the responsibility for the pastoral care of the congregations as corporate entities the incumbent of this office [i.e., the Regional Minister] will seek to counsel personally with congregations for their welfare in such situations as: internal crises which disrupt the peace of the congregation; the calling of a pastor; the termination of the service of a pastor; problems relating to the growth, morale and program of the congregation; problems relating to changing conditions of new situations facing the congregations; the introduction of new ideas or programs to the congregations and all other situations where the congregation has a need which calls for outside assistance.³⁶

The pastoral office of the bishop is broad and deep, as ambiguous and as vital for the church as was indicated in the quotations with which we began this section. It may well be the very heart of the bishop. A fitting conclusion to the discussion of the pastoral office of the bishop is an incident related by A. T. Hanson. He tells of a young presbyter of the Church of South India who had come from a Congregationalist tradition being queried by a Welsh Congregationalist about how he could accept the authority of a bishop. The presbyter responded,

We do not look on our bishop as an administrator, or a tyrant, or a master. We look on him as a father, and naturally we ask for, and act on, the advice of our father in God. This surely is the true relation of a bishop to his flock, personal, not legal; integral, not coercive. If a Christian relationship breaks down, there must be, and there is, a legal constitution. But the deepest relationship (may we not say "the theological relationship"?) is not legal but personal, spiritual in the Pauline sense of a relationship depending on God in the first place.³⁷

Administrators

³⁶Lair, p. 303.

³⁷Anthony Tyrrell Hanson, The Pioneer Ministry (London: SPCK, 1975), p. 169.

The chief danger against which the church must guard is forcing or allowing bishops to become, in Osborn's words, "cogs in the ecclesiastical machine." In commenting on trans-congregational bishops in the post-apostolic era, Alexander Campbell remarked:

They were not lords over God's heritage, over their conscience, or their estates; but they watched for their souls, and executed the laws of the kingdom. They ruled or administered the affairs of the Christian nation, and directed the energies of the brotherhood in all matters of common interest.³⁸

This episcopacy was beneficial in Campbell's estimation until a later time when, "Unholy and fleshly men sought to add temporal power to the spiritual . . . and in the end perverted [the office] into a political and temporal affair."³⁹ Clearly Campbell saw the bishops' distraction from the care of souls as the perversion of the office from its valid ministry.

When we speak of the administrative function of the bishop, we are dealing in an area which presents the possibility of distracting him from presenting to the church and the world the gospel of Christ. On the other hand as chief administrator of his diocesan church, he will be in an excellent position to put that gospel into action.

The section entitled "Administrative Leaders" in A Plan of Union presents the type of approach which is required.

Bishops have responsibility for the supervision and administration of the church's organized work and life. As chief shepherds, they serve, either directly or by delegation, as participants in the development of administrative policy and as the church's principal executive officers for the effecting of policy. In order that detailed administrative duties may not hinder other functions of the bishops, care is to be taken to provide them with competent

³⁸Campbell, p. 60. ³⁹Ibid.

assistance.⁴⁰

The Second Vatican Council placed on the bishops direct responsibility for administering not only program but human and financial resources in proclaiming the gospel. "With all their energy, therefore, they must supply to the missions both workers for the harvest and also spiritual and material aid"⁴¹ The Council also emphasized the duty of the bishop to minister to the needs of the priests. "He should be concerned about the spiritual, intellectual, and material condition of his priests."⁴² These kinds of administration of resources for proclaiming the gospel and meeting the needs of those who are dependent on the church are not limited to the Roman Catholic community but are common to all the church. It is important to note that they have a clearly evangelical or pastoral intent.

The episcopal officers should be provided with the material resources to function in these areas of evangelization and support of ministers and their families to the extent that the regional churches are able.

It would be a mistake to bifurcate the pastoral and administrative roles of the episcopal office. Several of the Regional Ministers made this very clear in remarks which they made on the set of questionnaires which will be used extensively in the next chapter of this study. Management of the church's personnel and resources and planning of educational and service programs are certainly essential to

⁴⁰ Consultation on Church Union, p. 52.

⁴¹ Abbott, pp. 45 f. ⁴² Ibid., p. 408.

the proclamation of the word of God. Moreover, meetings of all the various committees, boards, departments, etc., by which the work of the church is done in our time can be significant. It is the responsibility of the bishop and the whole church to make certain that his time, as well as that of all participants in church programming, is used as well as possible.

The church can show a different style of life and work to the world than has been generally accepted. This would be in part a style in which human beings are given the highest priority in planning and management, the poor and oppressed are seen as people of special importance to the affluent and free, leisure and play rank beside work and productivity in virtue, in which means are as important as ends. In short it would be a style which refutes much contemporary wisdom as to what constitutes the optimum of living. But this will not happen if the church allows herself to be engaged in the same "business as usual" approach which the world assumes. The ultimate betrayal of this mission to speak a new word to the world about the way it lives and works would be if the bishops, the guardians of the faith, were to proceed to do "business as usual." The business of the church must always be conducted with the clear understanding that it is auxiliary to ministry. The business of the church is ministry. The objects of that ministry are always people.

Evangelists

Among Disciples of Christ the office of Regional Minister has grown in large part from the office of state or area evangelist. One

of the primary tasks of the predecessors of today's Regional Ministers was the planting of new congregations and the encouragement of growth and strength among those already established. With the changing conditions in American religious life and the development of the office into an episcopate, an office of general, pastoral oversight, the evangelistic nature of the office may have been too radically displaced from being its central activity.

As has been noted there is a strong tradition in the church relating the ministry of bishops in later ages to the ministry of the apostles at the beginning of the Christian era. If this in fact be the case, then we can see a recapitulation on the American frontier nearly two thousand years later of the early pattern where traveling apostles, ambassadors, witnesses to the resurrection of Christ, became settled pastors and superintendents of the congregations of Christians in a given area. In any event there has been a strong linkage between the apostolic, evangelizing office and that of the episkopos.

The "Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church" coming from the Second Vatican Council is quite specific in relating the episcopal office to the work of evangelization.

As members of the body of bishops which succeeds the College of apostles, all bishops are consecrated not just for some one diocese, but for the salvation of the entire world From this fact arises that communion and cooperation between Churches which is so necessary today for carrying on the work of evangelization. In virtue of this communion, individual Churches carry a responsibility for all others For the extension of the Body of Christ is the duty of the whole College of Bishops.⁴³

⁴³Ibid., pp. 624 f.

The Decree continues by encouraging the bishops to "gladly foster vocations to mission communities among young people and clerics."⁴⁴ And further: "The bishop will exhort and help the diocesan congregation to play a role of their own in the missions."⁴⁵

The evangelistic responsibility of the bishop is restated in "Chapter VII on Ministry" of A Plan of Union revised by the Consultation on Church Union in January of 1980.

It is an essential task of bishops, both collegially and individually, to further the mission of God's People in Christ to the whole world in fostering communities of faith and in clarifying the demand for social justice which is directly involved in the mission. In company with other ministers, they take initiative in evolving new approaches for mission to the districts entrusted to their care.⁴⁶

The task of extending the kingdom of God, witnessing before the world to the resurrection of Christ, indeed being on the growing edge of the church's proclamation and ministry is central to the office of bishop.

Ecumenists

The final title under which I shall discuss the ministry of the episcopal office is that of ecumenist. The various descriptions of the bishop's responsibility with which we have been dealing come around again and again to the conclusion that dialogue with the whole church to the end that unity might be achieved is one of his chief

⁴⁴Ibid., pp. 624 f. ⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶"Consultation on Church Union, Chapter VII on Ministry," Presbyterian Outlook, 162:7 (February 25, 1980), 12.

concerns. Given the understanding of the office which has already been discussed with some care, that it is a center and symbol of the unity and continuity of the church, it is not an unexpected outcome of this understanding that he would have large responsibility for this aspect of the church's life.

If the assumption of this study be correct that there is a supracongregational, episcopal office of guardianship which appears in every sector of the church which takes its task of ministry seriously, then it is not exceptional that those who occupy this office may well perceive themselves as being in a somewhat comparable position to one another as regards their relationship to the church of Jesus Christ, its members, and its ministry. Perceiving this basic unity of their offices and being symbols of the unity of the church, it becomes apparent that the ecumenical office of the bishop is not simply an appended responsibility to an already lengthy portfolio, it is of the very essence of the episcopate to seek, foster, and preserve the unity of the church.

Of this responsibility the drafters of the chapter on "Ministry" of A Plan of Union have written:

As personal representatives of the given unity of the Church in all places and all ages, bishops have, both individually and collegially, an obligation "to call the churches to the goal of visible unity . . ."47

The Second Vatican Council dealt at length with the issue of ecumenism and called on the bishops to "deal lovingly with the separated brethren, urging the faithful also to conduct themselves with

⁸²Ibid.

great kindness and charity in their regard, and fostering ecumenism as it is understood by the church."⁴⁸

The "Guidelines" for Disciple Regional Ministers states a qualification for the office, "A commitment to the ecumenical concerns and mission of the church."⁴⁹

Because of his unique position and viewpoint in the church, we should look for the bishop to have a special investment in Christ's plea for the unity of his people.

Summary

This description of what the church seeks and needs as it endows some of its people with the office of bishop is certainly incomplete in many respects and even so it is certainly beyond the capacity of any single human being or even a talented team of human beings to perform well all of these functions all of the time. In order for the episcopal office to be fulfilled effectively, the whole church must be involved in a collegial enterprise of ministry. We must not look for perfect individuals to fill the office (despite some of the medieval expectations), rather we must look for capable individuals and support them well.

⁴⁸Abbott, p. 409. ⁴⁹Lair, p. 305.

Chapter V

AN APPRAISAL OF CURRENT THINKING ABOUT THE
EPISCOPAL OFFICE AMONG THE DISCIPLES OF CHRIST

We have just concluded a careful cataloguing of the attributes for which the church looks to the episcopal office. These have been supported primarily by guidelines, constitutions, and high level unity negotiations. Remote as such pronouncements seem to be from day to day life in the church, they provide important directional signals, carefully thought through, which may aim the people of God toward ever more faithful servanthood.

The issues now before us are how close the present reality approximates the ideal and how possible and desirable the ideal is of approximation. [How close are we and do we want to and can we get any closer?]

I shall draw on two major sources in the attempt to measure this approximation. First is the corpus of official statements which govern the operation of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). This consists primarily of the "Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)" by which the Church is governed at the general level, the constitutions and by-laws of the various regional churches in the denomination, and sundry other documents such as job descriptions, personnel policies, and guidelines adopted by the regions. And second are responses obtained from Regional Ministers, local pastors, and laypersons through questionnaires and correspondence.

The "Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)"

1970-1971

1970-1971

in its statements regarding "The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Regions" reinforces much of the style which we have discussed in Chapter IV above. It calls for Regional Ministers to be "spiritual and administrative leaders and to be chief executive officers of the regions."¹

The ministries of the regions, which the Regional Ministers are to lead, are described in these terms:

. . . to extend the ministry of Christ in mission, witness, and service among the people and social structures of the region . . . to establish, receive and nurture congregations in the region, providing help, counsel and pastoral care to members, ministers and congregations in their mutual relationships and relating them to the whole church.²

These statements underline the office of pastor and evangelist.

When the "Design" calls the region to "establish structures . . . in which congregations and ministers find their primary relationships of mutual support and encouragement,"³ it lifts up the concepts of collegiality and catholicity. When it calls on regions to "provide opportunities for regional . . . worship . . ."⁴ it recognizes the liturgical office in regional life.

The "Design" emphasizes the prophetic and teaching office within regional life when it calls for regions to be concerned with "continuing renewal of the life of congregations, members and ministers" It articulates the pastoral office when it charges regions

¹Year Book & Directory of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) (Indianapolis: 1979), p. 13.

²Ibid., p. 12. ³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

with the responsibility,

to certify the standing of ministers and provide help, counsel and pastoral care to ministers and congregations in such matters as: ordination, licensing, ministerial relocation, establishment and dissolution of pastoral relationships, and installations of ministers. Regions seek to supply a ministry for congregations without full-time pastoral services and offer counsel and assistance in cases of difficulties between ministers and congregations.⁵

Although these responsibilities are assigned to the region, it can be presumed that they devolve largely on the office of Regional Minister since he is, in the words of the "Design," "spiritual and administrative leader" of the region.

The constitutions of the regions furnish a very different view of the office. In most of these, though not all, there is the suggestion that this is a pastoral office and the Regional Minister has some pastoral or ministerial responsibility. However, the emphasis in describing this ministry lies heavily on the words executive and administrative. Whereas the pastorality of the office is always vague, being compared to the ministry of the pastor of a local congregation when it is defined at all, the executive responsibilities for convening committees, employing office personnel, keeping records, etc., are frequently delineated quite carefully. At least one regional constitution makes it a point to circumscribe in very direct terms the authority of the Regional Minister in an area which we have described above as relating directly to the episcopal office. "The Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the Southwest" says this:

⁵ Ibid.

The office of the regional minister shall be executive and pastoral. However, the regional minister shall have no authority to ordain ministers, or to assign or to recall the same, or to proceed to any disciplinary or punitive action against any minister or lay person. (Paragraph 34)

Perhaps this was written as a response to some local situation for it is not a standard feature of these documents. But it does seem to represent a caveat in an area, i.e., oversight of the church's ministry, where we should encourage boldness and not timidity. Not that we should endorse unilateral action on the part of the Regional Minister, but that he should be emboldened and not cautioned in speaking out against erroneous thought and action in the church. He should be provided with channels for diminishing the destructive effects of perversions of the church's ministry. Such channels would, of course, represent a wide consensus of the church and be responsible and open in their investigations. We are not looking for tyrants, but we are looking for legitimate, courageous leadership. A statement such as this from the "Design" of the Southwest Region appears to contradict the concept of collegiality, in spirit if not in intention. It seems almost as if the local pastors and lay people had no essential relationship to the Regional Minister.

It is revealing that one of the rare instances of constitutional explication of the pastoral responsibility of a Regional Minister comes as a limitation on his office. This is no doubt where many Disciples stand with regard to episcopal oversight. They see it as an imposition and a threat rather than an integral and edifying function solidly within the church's life.

Another conclusion to which a perusal of constitutional

statements regarding the office of the Regional Minister leads us is that the models on which the framers of these documents have drawn are those of business, government, or the local congregation. Whether from unfamiliarity or disregard, they have not used the models available from the church's own history, study, and practice through the centuries as these have treated the episcopal office. If such models had been explored, we should have expected considerably more direction with regard to the pastoral office of the Regional Minister.

Another genre of official statements is beginning to gain currency among the Disciples. These are so-called "Job Descriptions" or "Personnel Policies." And though these designations appear to come more from the business than the ecclesiastical sector, they tend to expand more than did the regional constitutions on what the church seeks from her Regional Ministers.

From the "Professional Job Description" of the Christian Church in Pennsylvania come these statements:

The office of General [i.e., Regional] Minister is ministerial-pastoral in character . . . [He performs] the pastoral, priestly, prophetic, teaching, administrative and other historic responsibilities . . . of the Ordained Ministry.

This office . . . is one of the ordered means through which the Church implements its corporate shepherding obligation. It assigns to the Office the responsibility of primary spiritual oversight and care for the life and work of the regional manifestation of the church . . .

The General Minister serves primarily as the regional pastor of the Christian Church in Pennsylvania . . . responsible for the spiritual oversight of the church and her pastors . . .

[The Church] seeks to assure that the primary character of the Office of General Minister will be ministerial-pastoral and demonstrates this by personal attitude and behavior.

This description catches much of the spirit of the episkopos as we have defined it. The "Personnel Policy" of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Oregon displays some of this vision when it calls for the Regional Minister to have "pastoral responsibilities to be available: To the local congregation as counsellor and consultant, seeking pastoral leadership and [in] program areas. [He shall have pastoral responsibilities to be available:] To ministers and prospective ministers as counsellor and consultant in personal and ministerial matters."

The "Job Description" for the Regional Minister in the Illinois/Wisconsin region calls for him to be: "Priest/Pastor/Administrator of the Christian Church in the Region" Under the heading "Priestly Service," it calls for him to preside at "the Regional Church's Corporate Worship." Further it proposes that, "When possible, and where it can be done appropriately, [he symbolize] the corporate presence of the Regional Church in ordinations, dedications and installations in local congregations." This is an important recognition of the Regional Minister as a symbol of the catholicity of the church, Holmes' "sacramental person." Moreover, this description encourages the Regional Minister of Illinois/Wisconsin to: "Initiate contact with congregations when needs are perceived." This is a vital prerogative of episcopal oversight.

These kinds of documents indicate an increasing awareness of the importance of the episcopal office in the life of this church.

Responses to a questionnaire returned by twenty-eight of a possible thirty-one Regional Ministers of the Christian Church

(Disciples of Christ) give some idea of how these individuals view their office in the church today. The questionnaires took the form of twelve statements followed by a continuum on which responses of varying degrees of agreement or disagreement could be recorded.

In terms of the performance of administrative and pastoral functions within their regions, more than two-thirds of the respondents saw their involvement in these roles as approximating or corresponding to those of the bishops of the Roman Catholic and Episcopal Churches. This appraisal held even more strongly in their appraisal of the pastoral than of the administrative function. One respondent separated those two denominations when queried about the administrative function and indicated a high approximation of the Episcopal and a low approximation of the Roman Catholic bishops. This division may well have been in part because of the manner in which Roman Catholic bishops deploy their clergy, a difference noted by others of the Regional Ministers on their responses. Several of the respondents remarked to the effect that it is artificial to separate the role of administrator from that of pastor as they are so closely interrelated. This author certainly agrees with that appraisal, and yet these two foci must be kept in view if we are going to preserve the episcopal function from becoming primarily that of an executive rather than a pastor, spiritual leader, and proclaimer of the Word of God.

An overwhelming majority of the Regional Ministers believed that their office has New Testament antecedents. One remarked tersely, "Office yes, title no." Only three of the respondents gave negative responses to this question. Two of them indicated that they believed

the office was a recent addition to the church's structures and came from a pragmatic rather than an historical or biblical rationale. One response to this line of thinking would be that from earliest times the pragmatic rationale has been prominent in the development of the episcopal office. If the office disappears for a time from a certain Christian community and then is reinstituted, once again for pragmatic reasons, may we not conclude that this is the same office that for one reason or another had for a time been abandoned.

More than 90% of the responding Regional Ministers indicated that they felt a strong sense of collegiality among the pastors within their respective regions. There are certainly individual pastors who prefer to avoid close relationship with their colleagues, but the prevailing view seems to be that of seeing the ministry as a collegial undertaking in which the Regional Minister plays a central role.

Nearly two-thirds of the respondents felt that it would affect their work adversely if they were exempted from membership in a local parish. One would expect that in a denomination which has played as much value on the centrality of the congregation as have the Disciples that it would be difficult to conceive of ministry's not being grounded in a local situation. And yet there may be some merit in considering the Regional Minister to be equally participant in all the local assemblages in a particular region with equal loyalty to and responsibility for each. This would also remove him from subjective involvement in any single congregation's affairs allowing him a free hand to minister to all parishes and pastors. Perhaps it is significant that nine of twenty-eight respondents clearly preferred not to

have local membership, and three others answered indefinitely placing their responses midway on the continuum of possible reactions.

A large majority (25-3) inclined toward the view that they stand in a position to hinder abuses of the good auspices (good offices, reputation) of the church. In the wake of the Jonestown tragedy, this issue stands forth in bold relief as an issue with which the church must deal. Evidently the Regional Ministers feel that it is within the purview of their offices to instruct and warn the members of their congregations of possible abuses which may be in process and therefore short-circuit or correct some of those abuses by their pastoral oversight.

In reply to the statement, "It would improve the ministry of Christ in your region if you were in a position to superintend funds and personnel in greater degree than is currently possible," eighteen of the Regional Ministers responded on the positive side of the continuum and nine on the negative. A few interesting remarks indicated that some of the respondents believed they were already in a position to supervise these resources to a rather significant degree. E.g.:

Actually we have more opportunity in this regard than may be acknowledged.

It is my belief that our present system, when working well, can produce the same results.

It appears that a large majority of the Regional Ministers are not constricted in their vision nor their exercise of their role of overseers of the church and her resources, episkopoi.

Twenty-three of the responding Regional Ministers indicated

that it was a more or less usual practice of theirs to initiate interventions into problems of the pastors or congregations of their regions. Five indicated that this was not their usual practice although none of these showed a strong adversity to initiating some such intervention on occasion.

This would seem to indicate that an aggressive approach to pastoral oversight is characteristic of the individuals selected to serve in transcongregational ministries.

Written comments concerning pastoral interventions varied from: "This is part of my job description. This and job relocation is my primary responsibility." to: "Sometimes, however, most often I try to honor the local autonomy principle."

More than two-thirds of the replying Regional Ministers were negative in their appraisal of the feasibility of more than one person's carrying the responsibility of Regional Minister at one time in a single region. It is a one person job in the minds of most. This is particularly true of concepts such as: sacramental person, chief administrator, leader of the diocese or district. It is interesting to compare this attitude with that already discussed which is found in the second century Clementine Homilies. [Cf. Chapter II.]

When asked about the possibilities of exploring the possibilities of the institution of the historic episcopate among the Disciples, over half the respondents believed that there are some "interesting possibilities" in this course of action for the achievement of church unity. The majority opinion in this issue (17 on the plus side, 11 on the minus) may prove somewhat surprising as the issue

of apostolic succession does not seem high on the agenda of most Disciples. Yet in looking toward a united church which would be in full communion, this is not in the least a side issue. If episcopal officers are charged in part with being ecumenists, guardians of the church's unity, it is important and a hopeful sign that the Regional Ministers and their counterparts in other denominations not neglect the centrality of this issue in the ongoing dialogue about the ministry of the church.

A rather interesting comment was written in response to the question regarding the "historic episcopate."

I think historic episcopate implies a power which we do not have. Ours is a ministry of management more than power or authority.

"Management" to many people would not be incompatible with "power or authority." And the point can well be made that managerial models are not the most helpful approaches to ministry at any level.

The final question put to the Regional Ministers concerned the value of their being officially designated with the title of bishop. A slight majority (14 to 9 with 4 at the half-way point on the continuum) did think in varying degrees that it would be helpful if they were so designated. Two comments from respondents almost indicate that the stature of the office and the officeholders should rise to the title before it would be conferred.

I am ambivalent primarily because the authority is earned. Name is not nearly as important as quality of person.

Not troubled by this designation if prayerfully given or if done in a biblical sense.

These appraisals concentrating on prayer and quality are important

considerations for the development of episcopacy, the ministry of oversight.

Two of the Regional Ministers in qualifying their opinions regarding the use of the title bishop pointed to what may be the antidote for power, authority, and manageriality. One simply penned the words, "Pastoral, servant person." The other, "If pastoral in nature."

The general tenor of responses to the questionnaire indicates that the Regional Ministers of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) tend to view their offices in much the same light as the episcopal office has been defined through history and as it is emerging from recent studies coming from both catholic and reformed traditions.

They take seriously their apostolates from the church and recognize the pastorality and authority of their offices. An important consideration in the development of the office will be the manner in which the people of their regions perceive their ministries.

In order to test these perceptions, brief questionnaires were circulated to seventy Disciples pastors along with five different, equally brief questionnaires to be distributed to members of their congregations. These questionnaires were circulated in two congregations in each region except none were circulated in Canada because of return postage problems, and three congregations rather than two were polled in the three largest regions of Indiana, Mid-America, and the Southwest. Because of the anonymity of the questionnaires, it is difficult to ascertain the degree of response from each region; but

postmarks indicate that they have been returned from throughout the church.

Needless to say this was not a scientific sampling. Smaller regions are represented disproportionately, and respondents were randomly rather than representatively selected. But it does give a grass-roots reaction to the issues surrounding the development of episcopal oversight among lay members and clergy of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

The responses of the laity evince the following information:

(1) Among responding laypersons there is a high degree of recognition of their Regional Minister. There were 202 positive responses to the question: "Do you know who your Regional Minister is?" There were 33 negative responses.

(2) There was also a high degree of recognition of the duties of the Regional Minister. In response to the question: "Do you have some idea of his responsibilities?" 207 responses were positive and 28 negative.

These two questions were asked to determine the visibility of the Regional Ministers to the people of their regions. In Chapter IV of this study, it was noted that, "A visible leader around whom the church can unify is an important factor in ministry." It would appear that, at least to their regional congregations, Regional Ministers are recognizably visible.

(3) In response to the question, "Would you compare this office to that of a bishop in other churches?" the responses were: 42 yes, 64 no, 96 somewhat, and 36 not sure.

The idea of episcopacy does not seem foreign to the laity of the Christian Church even though the word certainly might. This is an important discovery among a people who are heirs to broad streaks of congregationalism and anti-clericalism.

One respondent made this comment: "I hate to sound this negative, but the reason I left the Methodist church years ago, was to enjoy the Congregational autonomy of the Disciples of Christ as opposed to the arbitrary and dogmatic dictates of some authority above the local church level." The church is obviously, as always, finding her way tentatively toward faithful servanthood.

(4) When asked, "Would you feel comfortable calling a Regional Minister of the Christian Church bishop?" the responses were as follows: 41 yes, 141 no, and 55 would have to think about it.

Perhaps the most interesting finding coming from this question is that more than a third of the respondents would favor or at least be open to considering the possibility of calling their Regional Ministers "bishops."

(5) The final question to laypersons was, "Would it bother you if the Christian Church proceeded to study the relationship of our office of Regional Minister to the office of bishop in other churches?" Responses to this question were as follows: 71 yes, 129 no, and 34 not sure.

This would indicate a willingness on the part of the majority of church members to explore this issue as the church proceeds in her mission.

A few respondents indicated a strong distaste for the idea of

a bishop in their midst, and at least one expressed the opinion that this is an unnecessary diversion of the church from her ministry. Several indicated the need for revitalization of a commitment to the gospel as though this were something separate from or even antithetical to a vital episcopal ministry. We would argue that these are integral to one another.

Doubtless hostility arising out of generations of prejudice against the title of bishop and unfamiliarity with the history of the concept of episcopacy in the church as a well-founded respect for democratic institutions, have contributed to the responses of a large number of people in this survey. Yet it would appear that the development of episcopacy is not out of the question in the minds of many people in the congregations as the church continues her search for the unity and faithfulness to which she is called.

Five different questions were put to the ministers who were polled. Four of these were statements to be reacted to along a continuum. The fifth was a question requesting a "yes" or "no" response.

(1) The first statement was: "A Regional Minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) holds an office which approximates the office of bishop in churches which hold the historic episcopate." This elicited a positive response with 34 answering on the agree side of the continuum and 20 on the disagree side. When only the responses in the first and last third of the continuum are counted, the results show 30 agreeing and 16 disagreeing.

Despite the opinion of most that there is an approximation in

office, there was a marked discomfort with the title bishop as is revealed in responses to statement two.

(2) This statement read: "I would be comfortable designating Regional Ministers with the title 'Bishop.'" Of the respondents 24 were on the agree half of the continuum and 32 on the disagree half. Dropping the middle of the continuum and retaining the first and last thirds showed 21 agree and 27 disagree. Most respondents were either very positive or very negative.

Obviously the title bishop inspires different emotions among Disciples clergy. But this response indicates a remarkable movement toward an acceptance of a model which not too many years ago would have been considered totally alien if not unconscionable among a large preponderance of Disciples. Perhaps time, dialogue, education, and generally prayerful and loving consideration of the issue will eventuate in a consensus with which Disciples can live and work effectively.

(3) The third issue dealt with collegiality within regions. The statement was made: "The pastors and Regional Minister in my region function in a collegial relationship, as a team, allowing for degrees of participation within the team." The responses to this statement were overwhelmingly positive. Agreeing with the statement were 52 of the respondents while only two were on the disagree side and two others were placed directly in the middle of the continuum.

What appears to be emerging is a pattern not unlike that called for in Chapter IV of this study and described in Chapter II as the historic practice of the church. That is the ministry of a

district serves as a collegium with the "episkopos" as the leader. The pattern is becoming Disciples practice although the title bishop has yet to win acceptability for the episcopal figure.

(4) The acceptability of this pattern seems to be reflected in the responses to the fourth statement: "It would be helpful in ecumenical dialogue and the interpretation of the gospel to accord more visibility and dignity to the office of Regional Minister." Responses to this statement numbered 37 on the agree side, 14 on the disagree side, and 3 directly in the middle. This would appear to indicate a somewhat general respect among Disciples clergy of the central role of the Regional Minister in the performance of the church's mission. One respondent believed that the two concepts of "ecumenical dialogue" and "interpretation of the gospel" should be separated and would answer "yes" in the former and "no" in the latter instance. This author would contest this conclusion.

(5) The final issue put to the clergy respondents was: "Do you believe that there is any possibility that Disciples could incorporate the historic episcopate into their life and worship at some future date?" The responses to this question were 15 yes, 32 no, and 9 can't say.

The intent of this question was to ascertain if there is any interest among Disciples in merging their ministries with those of churches holding the historic episcopate. The responses indicate that this does not appear to be a lively issue within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) at the present time, although a different phrasing of the question might have elicited a clearer reaction in

this matter.

The responses from Regional Ministers, laity, and pastors indicate a wide diversity of opinion regarding the development of the episcopal office. The issue is far from resolved, but there does seem to be an emerging acceptance of the episcopal pattern even though the terminology used throughout most of the church has not become acceptable among Disciples. And yet even this nomenclature is finding a place in the vocabulary of some members of the Christian Church.

Chapter VI

A POSSIBLE DIRECTION FOR THE FUTURE

If the conclusions of this study are correct, there is in place among the Disciples an office of general oversight, an episcopate, the Regional Ministry. This is not alien to the one, holy church of Jesus Christ nor is it alien to the traditions and aspirations of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) although certain terminology and practices are being introduced or perhaps revived which had for some time been foreign to or dormant among Disciples. Unity, catholicity, good order, and biblical models are essential to Disciples thinking though these have often been sacrificed to concepts such as autonomy, privatism, independency, and managerial models.

The first proposal which I would advocate as coming from this de facto episcopate is that Regional Ministers be referred to by the traditional, widely recognized, and New Testament title of "bishop" which carries well the meaning to the church and the world of the place our regional leaders hold in our life together.

Such a return to traditional ecclesiastical terminology and practice, even without altering the nature of this regional ministry, would give Disciples a shared language with the more than two-thirds of Christendom which has from earliest recorded church history not known a church without bishops.

Already it is not uncommon to hear Disciples folk explain their Regional Minister's status with a somewhat self-conscious definition such as: "Well, he's sort of like a bishop in your church." or more

directly, "He's our bishop." The office is a central component of and provides important direction for the church's ministries of love, service, and proclamation.

Certainly the word has the power to raise anxiety for many; but if a neologism like "Regional Minister" was able to gain general acceptance within a few years, perhaps the more descriptive and biblical word bishop could do so as well, if introduced thoughtfully and given an intelligent rationale.

Along with the title and concept of bishop, we would look for a dialogue within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and with other churches relating to the incorporation of the historic episcopate which is received as a vital gift by most of the church and appears to be a sine qua non for full communion among all Christians. This is a goal which gave birth to the Disciples and toward which they have always striven.

This possibility of such a dialogue certainly accords with the recently revised "Chapter VII on Ministry" of "In Quest of a Church of Christ Uniting."

The uniting church intends that its bishops should stand in continuity with the historic ministry of bishops as that ministry has been maintained through the ages, and will ordain its bishops in such a way that recognition of this ministry is invited from all parts of the Universal Church.¹

Looking toward the "Coming Great Church," John Knox has concluded:

¹"Consultation on Church Union, Chapter VII on Ministry," Presbyterian Outlook, 162:7 (February 25, 1980) 12.

The critical issue, then, is not whether we shall have episcopacy simply as such; this we all have, and it is important that we recognize this common possession. The issue is whether we shall accept episcopacy in a special sense: namely, as a distinct order of ministry, superior to the presbyterate and diaconate, and as standing in a particular historic succession. I have said that I see no hope of a united church without the universal acceptance of episcopacy in this historic sense.²

The possible methods of incorporating the historic episcopate are varied. One hope is that it could come through a general union such as that proposed by the Consultation on Church Union. Perhaps conversations could be pursued with the Episcopal Church to unite the ministries of the two churches even before a complete merging of the two communions was undertaken as this latter would involve many ramifications beyond ministry. The current proposal for a covenant relationship between the Church of England and four smaller English Christian communities: the Methodist Church, the United Reformed Church, the Moravian Church, and the Churches of Christ which are related to the Disciples, a proposal which includes the introduction of the historic episcopate into these four churches, will be of interest in this regard.³ A highly symbolic and attractive avenue for the sharing of the episcopate would be to pursue the sharing of ministries with one of the new church communities which holds the historic episcopate such as the Church of South India or the Church of North India into which the Disciple community has already been incorporated.

²John Knox, The Early Church and the Coming Great Church (New York: Abingdon Press, 1955), p. 123.

³Trevor Beeson, "New Unity Scheme in Britain," Christian Century, XCVII (October, 1980), 899 ff.

A. T. Hanson writing from the perspective of the Church of South India states:

The truth is that in a divided Church we must be prepared for anomalies, and recognize that perhaps God is leading us into a way of repairing our divisions through the experience of the younger churches which, by their very missionary situation, are able to teach us something about how the catholic Church would function in an undivided Christendom.⁴

Other possible means of achieving this end may emerge as the conversation proceeds.

This proposal is not to indicate a disavowal of the historic ministry of the Disciples which has been rich and praiseworthy and, we would maintain, valid. It is a ministry which will always reflect well on the work and service of Christ's whole church. We would argue that the time is at hand for a modification of this ministry which will permit of its being accepted by and united with the ministries of widening circles of Christian people. As has been amply evidenced, such modifications have occurred often within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Appropriate to this possibility is the following statement of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches:

The importance of the historic episcopate has not been diminished by the above-mentioned findings. On the contrary, these new insights are enabling churches without the historic episcopate to appreciate it as a sign of the continuity and unity of the Church.⁵

⁴Anthony Tyrrell Hanson, The Pioneer Ministry (London: SPCK, 1975), p. 161.

⁵One Baptism, One Eucharist, and a Mutually Recognized Ministry, (Faith and Order Paper no. 73) (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1975), p. 39.

The "new insights" mentioned deal with a reinterpretation of the historic episcopate as an effective sign rather than a guarantee of the continuity of faith and mission in the church.⁶

A major development within the life of the Disciples which makes this a propitious time for such a consideration in the constituting of the office of general oversight which we have called the Regional Ministry, which correlates to the ancient and respectable office of bishop.

Other developments are the cordial atmosphere for dialogue among the denominations, catholic and reformed; the heightened awareness of the primacy of the one church over the several congregations and the awareness of their interrelatedness; the ease with which many members cross denominational lines; the extensive studies of ministry which have called our attention to the centrality of this issue for the further pursuit of our life together.

Long before we see an appearance of the historic episcopate and perhaps long before we call Regional Ministers bishop, with much regularity, we can serve the church well by continuing to explore ways in which the Regional Ministers can best fulfill the office of episkopos. Two practices which could well be instituted early would be the broadening of participation in each region in the process of calling the Regional Minister and the participation of other Regional Ministers in his installation. The suggestion has been made by one clergy respondent to the questionnaire which has been used in this

⁶Ibid., pp. 37 f.

study that several candidates be presented to the regional assemblies so that the people can in fact select their Regional Minister. Variations on this practice have certainly been practiced over the years in other denominations. And yet the spectacle of a regional church's being factionalized by an electoral process bound to be marked by political maneuvering is hardly a prospect to be welcomed. Probably some procedure by which a nominating committee would be informed by the membership of the region to a high degree while it was selecting a single candidate is the best method available at present. I do believe that the election should be made in a regional assembly rather than by a regional board. In any case the people should have a sense of participation in the naming of the episcopal officer, and they should be well represented at his election and installation. The participation of other Regional Ministers and the General Minister of the church at his installation would signify the unity of the church and the collegiality of Regional Ministers in carrying forth their important functions which require all the support possible.

In Principal Robinson's words, "We shall need to sink our prejudices and submit the whole question to the sainted scholarship of the Church in every country."⁷ Much work, study, education, openness, awareness, compassion, and courage are required in this dialogue but anything else is not worthy of those who confess Christ the Lord and seek to be faithful to him in each age.

⁷William Robinson, Essays on Christian Unity (London: James Clarke, 1923?), p. 107.

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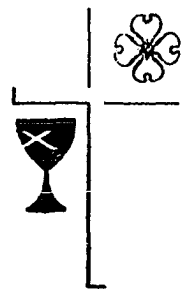
APPENDIX

Appendix A

QUESTIONNAIRE TO REGIONAL MINISTERS

On the following pages are facsimiles of a cover letter and questionnaire sent to all of the Regional Ministers of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in January 1979. The data supplied by this questionnaire are included in the text of the project on pages 73-79.

Due to the nature of the questionnaire, there appeared to be no feasible method of including the findings in total here. However, the completed questionnaires are on file and available upon request in the archives of Bethany College, Bethany, West Virginia.



Bethany Memorial Church of Christ

WILLIAM B. ALLEN
PASTOR

Mr. Charles E. Dietze, Regional Minister
1272 Delaware Avenue
Buffalo, New York 14209

Dear Sir:

I am currently a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Ministry at the School of Theology at Claremont. I have chosen for my degree project to work in the area of the development of the office of the regional minister among the Disciples, comparing and contrasting it with the historic episcopate in the life and history of the church.

I shall explore this office in regard to its facilitation of the ministry of local congregations and the work of parish pastors. And also I shall undertake to explore the place this office holds in our quest for Christian unity.

In preparing this project it has seemed well to try to discover how those who hold the office of regional minister view the responsibilities and possibilities of that office.

To make that assistance as easy as possible I am asking that you take a moment to complete the questionnaire which I am enclosing. If you would like to append any remarks or insights please do so.

Also I should appreciate having a copy of your region's constitution if it is available. Any other material or suggestions which you think might be helpful as I undertake this admittedly broad project would be most appreciated.

I know how time consuming and annoying requests such as mine can be. And yet the fascinating discoveries I have made through library research make me bold to request your assistance.

Thanks for whatever help you can render me and, whether or not you find time to respond, God bless you richly in your ministry.

Sincerely,

William B. Allen

WBA:jp
Enclosure

Thank you for taking time to deal with this questionnaire. If you have any insights, comments, or suggestions please include them on this sheet or send them to me on a separate page. I have included no place for your signature and the opinions expressed with regard to these items will be treated anonymously. If you send any comments or ideas over your signature, either on this or another page, I may quote you on the proposed paper.

William B. Allen

1. The office of regional minister corresponds to the office of an Episcopal or Roman Catholic bishop as regards administrative duties.

In large degree 1 . 2 . 3 . 4 . 5 . 6 . 7 . 8 . 9 . 10 . Not at all

2. The office of regional minister corresponds to the office of an Episcopal or Roman Catholic bishop as regards pastoral care of congregations or pastors.

In large degree 1 . 2 . 3 . 4 . 5 . 6 . 7 . 8 . 9 . 10 . Not at all

3. The office of regional minister has New Testament antecedents.

Very definitely 1 . 2 . 3 . 4 . 5 . 6 . 7 . 8 . 9 . 10 . Not at all

4. The parish ministers in your region are involved in a collegial co-ministry with you and with one another.

Very closely 1 . 2 . 3 . 4 . 5 . 6 . 7 . 8 . 9 . 10 . Not at all

5. The work of the regional minister would be effected if he were exempted from membership in a local parish.

Positively 1 . 2 . 3 . 4 . 5 . 6 . 7 . 8 . 9 . 10 . Adversely

6. Regional ministers are in a position to hinder abuses of the auspices (good offices, reputation) of the church.

Effectively 1 . 2 . 3 . 4 . 5 . 6 . 7 . 8 . 9 . 10 . Not at all

7. It would improve the ministry of Christ in your region if you were in a position to superintend funds and personnel in greater degree than is currently possible. (I have in mind here the support of mission congregations, the emergency support of indigent ministers, and the temporary placement of pastors where it seems advantageous to the congregation and the minister - presuming no permanent settling of a pastor could take place without the consent of that pastor and the congregation.)

Great improvement 1 . 2 . 3 . 4 . 5 . 6 . 7 . 8 . 9 . 10 No improvement

8. It is your practice to initiate conversations and make pastoral interventions in your region when you see problems looming for congregations, pastors, or both in relationship.

Very often 1 . 2 . 3 . 4 . 5 . 6 . 7 . 8 . 9 . 10 Never

9. It is feasible for more than one person to carry the office of regional minister in a single region at the same time.

Absolutely 1 . 2 . 3 . 4 . 5 . 6 . 7 . 8 . 9 . 10 No way

10. You carry out your functions in roughly the following proportion:

Pastoral 1 . 2 . 3 . 4 . 5 . 6 . 7 . 8 . 9 . 10 Administrative

11. The concept of the historic episcopate holds some interesting possibilities for the Disciples as they organize for mission and following their "polar star" church unity.

Probably 1 . 2 . 3 . 4 . 5 . 6 . 7 . 8 . 9 . 10 Doubtful

12. It would be helpful in your ministry if you were officially recognized by your people and the general public as a 'bishop' of the church.

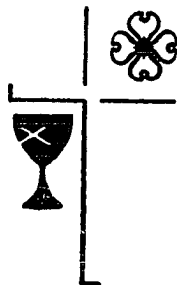
Yes 1 . 2 . 3 . 4 . 5 . 6 . 7 . 8 . 9 . 10 No

Appendix B

QUESTIONNAIRE TO LAYPERSONS AND MINISTERS

On the following pages are facsimiles of a cover letter and questionnaire sent to randomly selected laypersons and pastors of congregations of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) on June 2, 1980. The data supplied by these questionnaires are included in the text of the project on pages 79-85.

Due to the nature of the questionnaire, there appeared to be no feasible method of including the findings in total here. However, the completed questionnaires are on file and available in the archives of Bethany College, Bethany, West Virginia.



MAIN STREET • BOX 149 • BETHANY, WEST VIRGINIA 26032 • PHONE 304-829-7138

Bethany Memorial Church of Christ

WILLIAM B. ALLEN
PASTOR

To: Somewhat randomly selected Christian Church Ministers

From: William B. Allen *WBA*

Re: Help in a project

Date: June 2, 1980

Please excuse the production line fashion of this communication but due to time, expense, etc. (doubtless you understand) this is the most expeditious way of approaching the issue.

I am completing a Doctor of Ministry Degree at the School of Theology at Claremont in which I am exploring the development of the office of Regional Minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) comparing and contrasting it to the development of the office of bishop throughout the church and especially in those denominations which claim the historic episcopate. I think this has important ramifications for ministry and church unity.

I would appreciate your help and that of five laypersons in your congregation. I have designed what I hope will be easy to answer and return cards. Please fill out the pink one yourself and pass the white ones to five lay persons who are active and interested in church life. I am seeking responses from two congregations in each region in an attempt to get a broad geographical sampling. The ten dots on the continuum which follows most questions will indicate degrees of agreement or disagreement. If the congregation has changed pastors please fill out and return the cards anyway as if it were addressed to you.

I greatly appreciate your time and help in this endeavor. If I can ever return the favor, don't hesitate to ask.

Thanks.

A copy of the questionnaire mailed to randomly chosen laypersons of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is presented below.

1. Do you know who your Regional Minister is?
☐ yes ☐ no
2. Do you have some idea of his responsibilities?
☐ yes ☐ no
3. Would you compare his office to that of a bishop in other churches?
☐ yes ☐ no ☐ somewhat ☐ not sure
4. Would you feel comfortable calling a regional minister of the Christian Church bishop?
☐ yes ☐ no ☐ would have to think about it
5. Would it bother you if the Christian Church proceeded to study the relationship of our office of regional minister to the office of bishop in other churches?
☐ yes ☐ no ☐ not sure

The questionnaire which was sent to pastors of congregations of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is reproduced below.

1. A Regional minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) holds an office which approximates the office of bishop in churches which hold the historic episcopate.
agree disagree
2. I would be comfortable designating Regional Ministers with the title "Bishop."
agree disagree
3. The pastors and Regional Minister in my region function in a collegial relationship, as a team (allowing for degrees of participation within the team).
agree disagree
4. It would be helpful in ecumenical dialogue and the interpretation of the gospel to accord more visibility and dignity to the office of Regional Minister.
agree disagree
5. Do you believe that there is any possibility that Disciples could incorporate the historic episcopate into their life and worship at some future date?

yes

no

can't say